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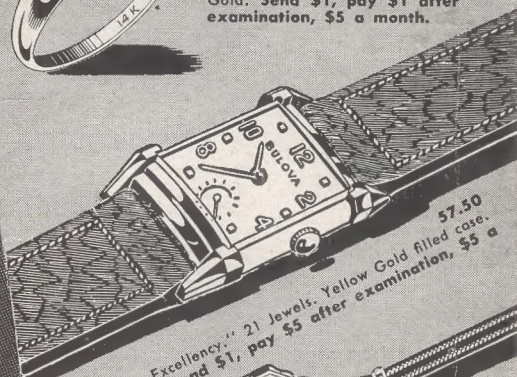


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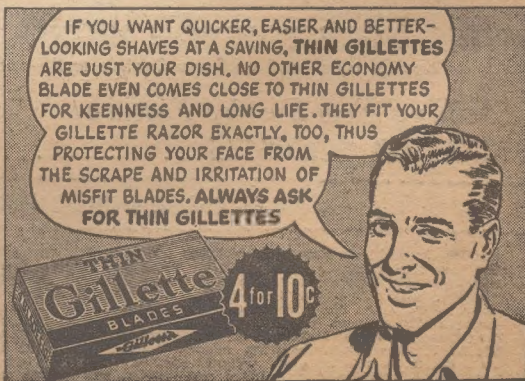
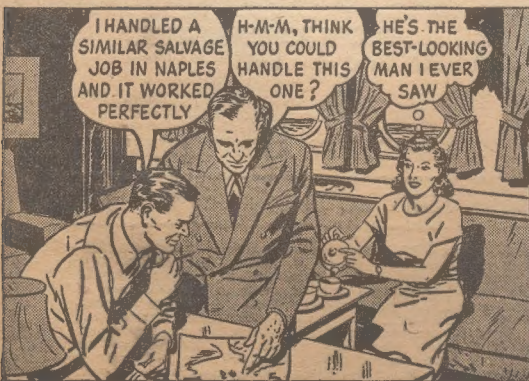
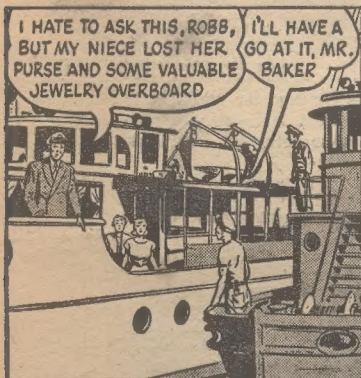
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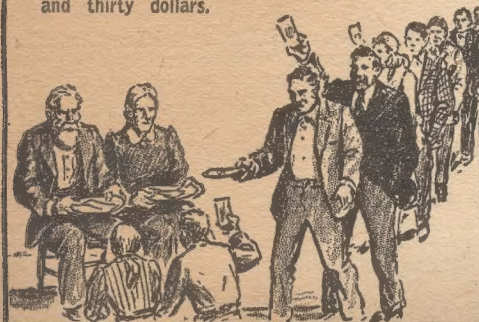
FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS



Most of the fly-by-night mining towns in the Southwest were christened on the spur of the moment, usually with such prosaic names as Centerville, Silver City, Goldfield, and so forth. One Nevada town, though, determined to take its time and select some really distinctive title. Two opposing factions sprang up, one favoring "Millionville," the other touting for "Crown City." Since both sides were equally well-armed and therefore equally persuasive, they came to an agreement. "The town shall have no name at all," they decided. And No-Name, Nevada, it was, and it remained that until its silver vein petered out in 1881.

In 1873, when Henry and Martha Tippet left their Ohio home to head West, they were saddened by the necessity of having to place their aged parents in the poorhouse, but a spring flood had washed away their farms and there were no other children in either family. They would, the newly-wedded couple decided, figure out some way to prevent such a tragedy in their own declining years. Fifty years later, they cashed in on the world's oldest kind of social security—they collected one dollar a week from each of their twenty-seven children and 103 grandchildren. Total: one hundred and thirty dollars.



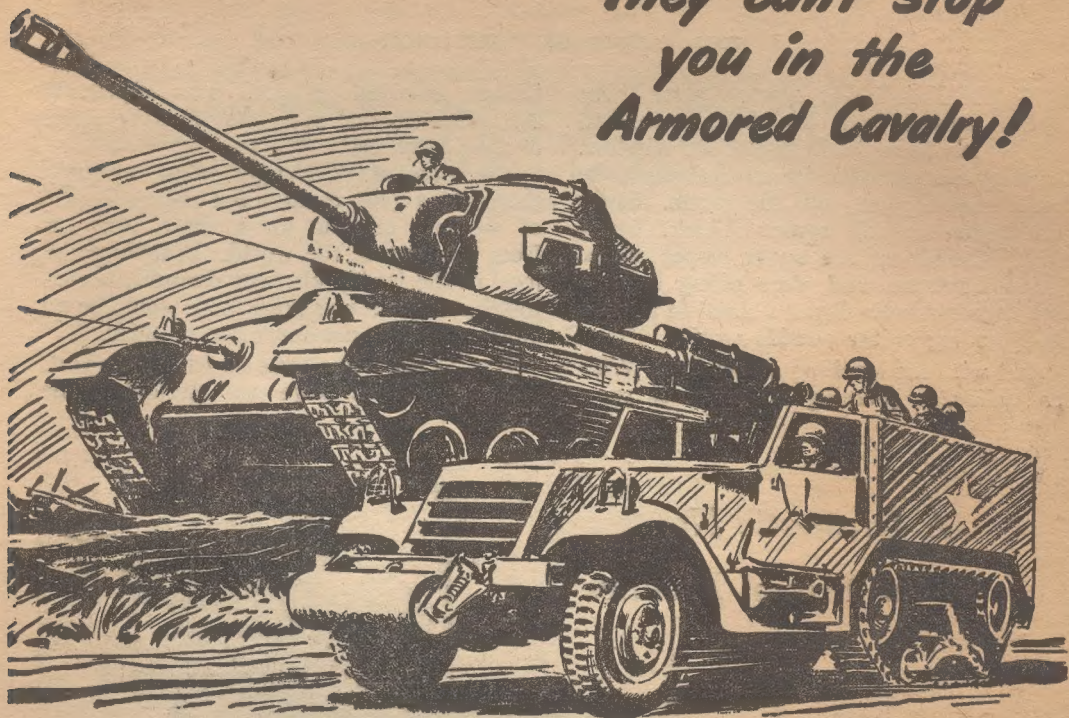
James Guard, an Englishman who emigrated to California in 1871, found, to his disgust, that he had come too late. The best mines, he observed, were already owned by someone else. A clerk's job he held with railway express in Sacramento did not begin to pay what he thought he was worth. One day it occurred to him that he was in a position to operate a profitable sideline and he began to send a weekly newsletter to a selected list of stage-robbing, sheriff-dodging subscribers, detailing the number of gold shipments anticipated, their estimated value and the routes along which they would travel. Unfortunately, after two profitable years, this unique financial information service came to an abrupt end when he lost his job—through an error in spelling.



Sam Gayn, of Tucson, hated John Knowles all his life but never had the nerve to kill him. Cowardice, or prudence, however, did not prevent him from threatening the man, who, he admitted, had never done him any harm but who just happened to get on his nerves. "I'll fill him full of lead," he often growled prophetically. Knowles, a crack shot, only laughed at Gayn's malice and kept his sixgun by his side. Some ten years later Knowles was thrown from a horse and killed. At the graveside, Gayn carried out his threat. Drawing his .45, he fired point-blank at the corpse of his life-long enemy. Knowles, at last, was "filled full of lead."



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• STARVATION VALLEY'S

Chapter I

COLD CLUTCH OF STARVATION!

WITH A SIGH, Doctor James Trent shoved back his chair, rose, and strode to the frost-covered window. Wiping the moisture from the pane, he stared moodily out into the storm. Snow had begun to fall again. Thick, heavy flakes blotted out the upper slopes of the Sierra Ladrone and were piling high in already impassable Grant's Pass—a narrow slash leading to the outside world.

And with the blocking of the Pass, Winter Valley, a booming oil town of some

fifteen hundred people, was hopelessly trapped—hemmed in by the towering peaks of the Ladrone.

Snow-bound! An ugly word, an ugly thought—a grim reality. An endless period of waiting, praying for a thaw. Cut off from the rest of the world. Watching the food in the family kitchens dwindle, knowing that when it was gone there would be no more—at least not for most of them.

Not because there was no food to be had. Thomas Jeffries' store was stocked to the

A Dramatic Novel of the Frozen Frontier

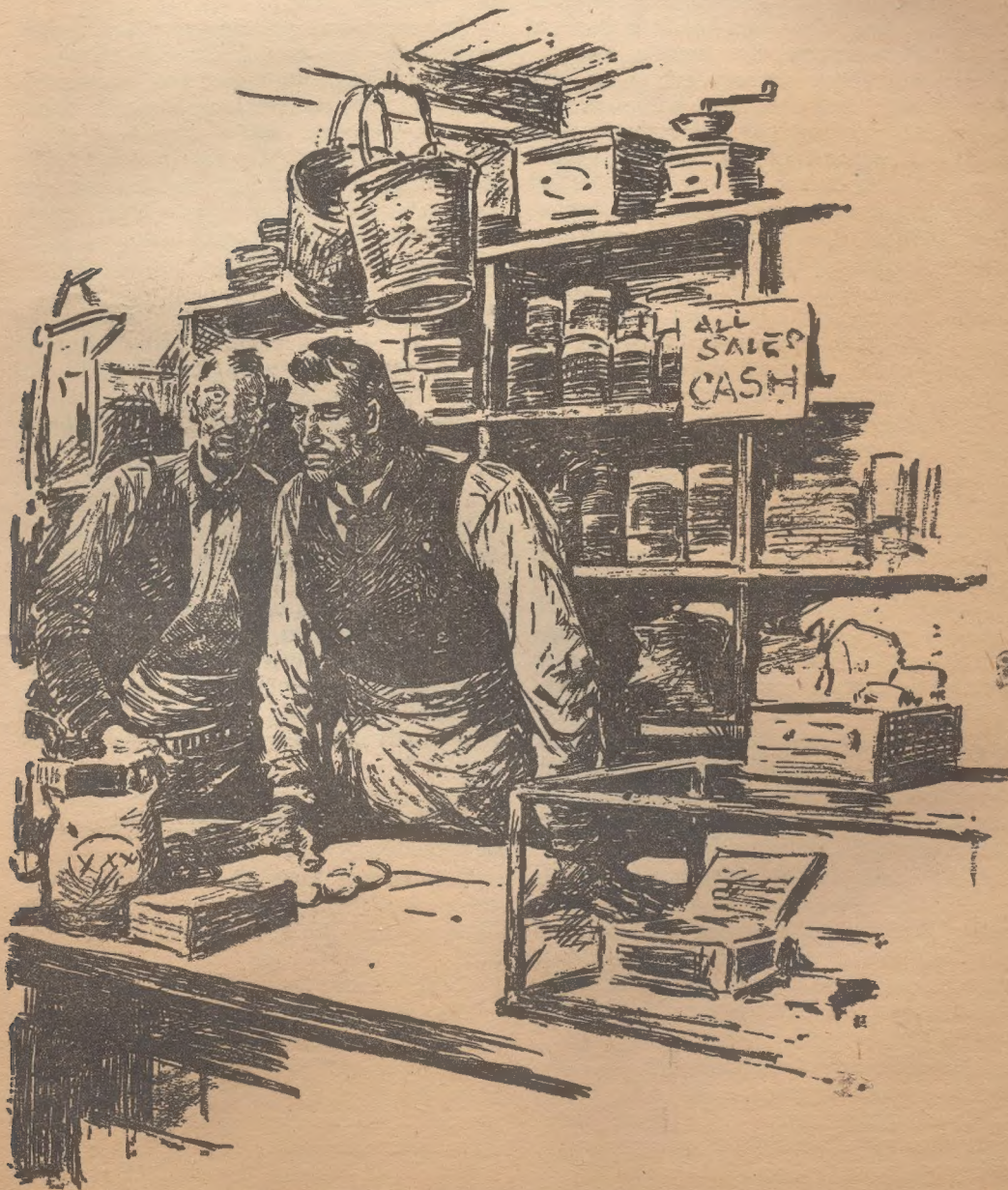
He drew the .45 from his hip. "I'm taking it just as is, Jeffries—the hell with your prices!"

By
**MAX
KESLER**



GUNSMOKE MEDICO

While bellies grew lean and hunger sapped the guts of those blizzard-bound boomtowners, the death-merchant of Winter Valley tightened his grip to throttle that starving town into submission. . . . Only one man, Dr. Jim Trent, dared make the desperate play that might serve up food to Winter Valley—or serve up Trent and all those honest townsfolk as breakfast for the cold-eyed buzzards! . . .



ceiling. But the vast majority could not afford to pay his exorbitant prices. Jeffries was no humanitarian. Those prices would stay where they were—until they went higher. As the town's situation grew more desperate, Jeffries would raise them until only a handful of the oil-rich could afford to buy food.

As for the rest of the town, they could—and they would—starve. It was an ugly, dangerous situation. And already sealed in for six weeks, there was but little hope of relief before spring, five months away.

Scowling, Trent turned back to his desk—a slender, well-built man with fine features and brooding eyes. Wearing a gray frock-tail suit and an Ascot tie, he looked every inch the doctor. At one time, he had moved among the great in medical circles. That fact he had almost forgotten now.

At thirty-five he had put that part of his life behind him. Why, Winter Valley would never know. Nor did it ever ask questions. It was enough that he was a fine doctor, never worried about fees, was friendly, and minded his own business.

He had come to Winter Valley two years before and set up an office over the Merchant's Bank. Within six months, he had lost all identity with his past. Since then, no one could remember him ever having turned a patient away for lack of money. He rode twenty miles through a blizzard to see a squatter's sick wife or an oilman with equal impartiality. He had made many friends, and a few enemies. He had even learned to carry a gun beneath the frock-tail coat.

All in all, Doctor Jim Trent was liked, admired, and respected. People had grown to depend upon him—not only in illness, but in all their troubles. Even now they were looking to him for help.

The frown settled deeper between his eyes as he slipped into a sheep-lined coat and picked up his medicine kit. He had promised Lem Perkins that he would drop around and have a look at Tommy this morning, and he dreaded the thought of it now.

The medicine in his kit couldn't do Tommy any good. Scurvy wasn't cured with pills, but with proper food. Food which Lem Perkins, a blacksmith, couldn't afford to buy at Jeffries' prices. Worse still, Tommy was but the first of many who would

soon be coming down with dread scurvy.

Meanwhile, Thomas Jeffries was sitting there in his big store with food stacked to the ceiling—for *those who could afford it*.

Jamming his hat savagely on his head, Trent went out into the snow-swept street. For a moment he stood there staring at the deserted scene. There was no wind, only an unnatural stillness about the town—save for occasional sharp pop of branches on the ice-laden trees.

It was a tense, brooding silence with ugly undertones that bespoke trouble ahead.

Trent blinked the snow from his eyes and made his way toward Lem Perkin's house, the hard-crust snow crunching dryly beneath his boots. He was a doctor who dealt daily with the little known facets of human nature. And he knew that the spirit, as well as the flesh, could stand only so much.

"WELL, DOC?" Lem Perkins—big, raw-boned, blond-haired—looked at Trent across the youngster beneath the quilt. "How is he?"

Silent, Trent dropped the stethoscope back into his kit and took out a vial of pills. "I'll leave him some medicine," he said. "If he gets worse, call me."

"But, Doc!" Perkins protested. "Them's the same pills you gave him last time. They didn't do no good. He's gettin' worse. For god's sake, what's wrong with him, Doc?"

Trent looked at Elizabeth Perkins—a frightened, toil-worn woman of forty who stood twisting her hands in her apron—hesitated, then said quietly, "You both might as well know. Your son's got scurvy."

Lem ran his tongue over suddenly dry lips. "You sure, Doc? You maybe couldn't be mistaken?"

"I'm sorry," Trent shook his head. "But salt pork and corn meal just aren't enough. Tommy needs fruit and vegetables. I don't like to be blunt, Lem, but unless he gets them he's going to die."

Lem gave him a helpless look, and on the other side of the bed Elizabeth Perkins began to cry. "What more can I do, Doc? I can't pay Jeffries' prices! And Tod Wilson ain't got anything left in his store but a little flour and beans.

"I tell you, Doc—" A smouldering anger began to build up in the big man's eyes.

"If Jeffries don't come down on his prices, I'm goin' to blow his guts out. Five dollars a dozen for eggs, fifty cents a pound for potatoes, a dollar for a twelve-cent can of peaches! Why, the—!"

"I know, Lem," Trent cut in. "And I'll admit something's got to be done about it. But killing Jeffries won't help. You'd only hang for it. For the sake of your family you've got to remember everything that follows, Lem."

"What do you expect me to do?" Lem stood there, his big fists clinched. "Sit here on my dead end and let my boy die while Jeffries has a store full of food? To hell with that kind of talk!"

Trent snapped shut his kit and slipped into his coat. "I expect you to remember that you're a human being, Lem. Not an animal!" he retorted. Then: "How are you fixed for money?"

"Enough." Lem's face reddened. "Like I told you, Doc, I do all right. But I'd be broke in two days if I bought from Jeffries. I can't—"

"Don't worry," Trent told him. "I'll see that you get what you need—at *regular* prices." He knew that he was dealing himself trouble, but you didn't dodge trouble in a case like this.

Elizabeth stopped crying, and Lem gave Trent a long, steady look. "I don't want you gettin' into any trouble on account of us, Doc."

"There won't be any trouble," Trent assured him. "I can handle Jeffries all right."

Lem shrugged. "Tell Doc what you want, Liz," he said, and hauled out a worn coin purse. Silently, he handed Trent seven one-dollar bills.

Trent accepted them, listening meanwhile to Elizabeth's eager voice. When she had finished with her list, Trent said, "Go back to your work, Lem. I'll have these things for you before dinner."

Lem said, "Thanks, Doc," but his smouldering eyes told him that unless those groceries came through there would be trouble. And Lem was no match for Jeffries with a gun. The minute he made a play toward Jeffries, Elizabeth would simply be another widow with a small son to worry about.

Without replying, Trent shoved out into the storm.

AS HE headed down the block to Tod Wilson's store, Trent found himself wondering more and more about that slide that had blocked Grant's Pass. It struck him as strange that never before in the memory of the oldest settler had the Pass been blocked.

Then too, there was the fact that the slide had started just when six freighting wagons inbound with a heavy consignment of goods for Tod Wilson's store had been due to enter the Pass. Something smelled rotten.

Trent frowned. He kept remembering that first dull rumble from the slope had not sounded like the grinding roar of a slow slide—but *dynamite*. It was a crazy thought, yet it still stuck. For things had worked out just a little too smoothly in Thomas Jeffries' favor.

Batting the snow out of his eyes now, Trent looked toward the Ladrones. The serrated peaks were lost in a swirling whiteness. Here, the storm was mild compared to the one raging around the towering summits.

Perhaps he was wrong. With snow falling steadily a week at a time over a period of the last two months—a slide was not improbable. Still—

He shook his head dubiously.

Thomas Jeffries had turned up in Winter Valley the year before and opened up a heavily stocked mercantile across the street from Tod Wilson. He had even gone so far as to bring in the latest fashions in ladies' clothing. A fact that delighted the ladies no end, but caused more than one man to knit his brows at sight of the price tags.

However, this was an oil town where money came easy, went easy. So Jeffries' Emporium did a thriving business in ready-to-wear. But, generally speaking, he had not done so well. His prices were so high that, after the first time, most people did not go back.

When he had approached Tod Wilson with the suggestion that he raise his prices also, the old man had stared at him coldly and said, "I've been here nigh onto twenty years, Jeffries, and I've done right well on a fair profit basis. Don't see any reason to change now."

A month later, Jeffries had tried to buy him out. But that, too, had met with a curt refusal. Jeffries just couldn't seem to get

anywhere with Wilson. The old man hated his kind, and that was that.

But he had had much better luck with Shelia, Tod's twenty-three-year-old daughter. For within six months, Shelia had broken her engagement to Jim Trent, and promptly became engaged to Jeffries. Which—since Tod Wilson liked Trent—in no way eased the tension between him and Jeffries.

After that, things settled down to a more or less state of armed truce. Jeffries brought in a couple of clerks—men with cold eyes who wore guns even in the store. But there was no violence or sabotage.

Jim Trent remained completely out of things. For although his sympathies were with Tod Wilson, he saw no reason to become involved in any fight between the old man and Jeffries. The town, as well as Shelia, would accuse him of siding Tod only because Jeffries had stolen his girl.

With the first spit of snow, Tod Wilson had engaged the Hobson Freighting Company to haul in his winter supplies. For Winter Valley—since most of its farmers had turned oilmen—was not self-subsistent.

But this time Wilson had waited too long. A howling blizzard swooping down out of the northwest—a snow slide that had sealed off Grant's Pass—and Winter Valley was hopelessly trapped.

As Tod Wilson's supply of food began to run short, the town was forced to turn more and more to Jeffries' Emporium for its needs. Jeffries met this increased demand upon his stocks with a sharp rise in prices. Prices which had mounted until most of the town could no longer meet them.

Three days before, a delegation had pleaded with Jeffries to lower his prices to a level with Tod Wilson's. Jeffries' reply had been short and terse. In effect it amounted to nothing more than—*Pay my prices, or starve*. Which was what a good deal of the town was doing now—starving.

APPROACHING Wilson's Mercantile Jim Trent frowned at sight of the long queued-up line of people patiently waiting their turn to enter. Across the street in front of Jeffries' Emporium, a much shorter line lounged about, exchanging gossip. This was the oil-rich crowd—operators and their wives. They could afford to pay Jeffries' prices, although as shrewd business men

they did not relish doing it at all. A grizzled little man in overalls and drillers' boots said, "Hello, Doc. How are things?" as Trent moved into the line in front of Wilson's.

Trent said, "Hello, Bart," and stared curiously at the little man. Ingalls was a tool dresser and made good money. Last week he had been in the line across the street, paying Jeffries' prices. "You're on the wrong side, aren't you, Bart?"

Ingalls shook his head wryly. "Not this time, Doc. Ain't you heard? Marin Oil's shut down all drilling on account of the weather. Too many accidents. Looks bad. A lot of us ain't going to be able to meet Jeffries' prices like we was. And me—well, I ain't one that likes to go hungry."

Trent's smile was grim. "You're luckier than most people. At least you ate this long."

Ingalls flushed. "I know it, Doc. And I'm damned grateful. But just the same—"

"But just the same." Trent's mouth lifted. "When your belly's empty, it hurts the same as anyone else's."

Ingalls shrugged, and grinned. "That's about the size of it, Doc." Then: "How you makin' out? Buying any groceries from Jeffries?"

"I'm still a bachelor," Trent reminded him. "Eating at Lu Chee's place as long as his supplies last."

"You know—" Ingalls broke off momentarily as the line shuffled forward a few feet. "You got no business eatin' in Chink restaurants and spendin' your spare time in a hotel room. You're not like a banker, Doc, handling dollars and cents. You're dealin' in human lives. And fightin' death is a big job. Takes a lot out of you."

He gave Trent a shrewd glance. "What you need, Doc, is a good woman to look after you. I was sorry to see you and Miss Shelia—"

Trent cut in abruptly, "How many men did you say were laid off, Bart?"

The tool pusher flushed, and muttered under his breath, "*Me and my big mouth!*" Then aloud, "Around three hundred and fifty, Doc. Just about every driller, tool pusher, and roughneck in the field. It's goin' to cut quite a hole in Jeffries' sales, and—" he grimaced, "a bigger hole in most of our bellies!"

"Five more!" Tod Wilson—a short,

stout little man with white hair, and a trace of an alderman—appeared briefly in the doorway. "Nothin' but beans and flour, folks. But while it lasts, it's yours at regular prices."

A plump, middle-aged woman at the head of the line turned and said, "You take my place, Doctor Trent," and, immediately, a half dozen men—their faces pinched with cold—volunteered their places. "Shucks," one of them said, "Your time's worth more'n ours, Doc. We ain't in no hurry."

Trent thanked them, but shook his head. He knew they had been standing here for hours, with the temperature close to zero.

"That's Doc for you," a man said in a low voice. "Never tries to take advantage of folks."

Trent flushed, and pretended he hadn't heard. He lost himself in thought until his turn came and he entered the warm dimness of the store.

Wilson spotted him and came over at once. "Hello, Jim," he said, shaking hands. "Haven't seen you around in weeks. Where you been keeping yourself?"

"This is my busy season, Tod," Trent reminded him. "Cold, pneumonia, God knows whatnot." Turning, he viewed the empty shelves, and fear touched him lightly then. Not for himself, but for people like the Perkins family. He said tightly, "Is this it, Tod?"

The old man's face was grim. "This is it, Jim. Maybe enough beans and flour for another week. After that—" Trent knew what was in his mind. After that, men would lose their inherent decency and become beasts, struggling for survival.

"I was hoping you might have a few lemons and some canned vegetables," he said, frowning. "You see, Lem Perkins' boy has scurvy. The first case."

Wilson swore softly. "That's bad, Jim." Then: "I've got a few things saved back. Some eggs and a few cans of milk. But no fruit or vegetables. What you can use, you're welcome to."

For a moment, Trent hesitated. Then he said, "Thanks. But you'd better keep that for Shelia and yourself. Curing one case of scurvy at the expense of two more wouldn't help."

The old man sank down on an upended crate, his other customers forgotten for the moment. "Scurvy!" he muttered. "It'll be

breaking out all over town pretty soon. What are you going to do about it, Jim?"

Trent shook his head. "I don't know. I can cure sickness, but I can't put food in peoples' bellies. That's the town's problem."

"It's all of that," Wilson agreed glumly. "And it's my fault. If I'd sent for those supplies a week earlier all this wouldn't have happened. As it was, Hobson almost got through at that."

He stared thoughtfully out the window toward the Ladrones. "You know," he mused. "It's a funny thing about Grant's Pass. Snow would have had to be awful heavy up there to start a slide. And there hadn't been much snow then. Something stinks about that slide, Jim."

"Meaning?" Trent lit a cigarette and blew smoke through his nostrils. He had not known that anyone else was suspicious of that slide.

Wilson kept his eyes on the flour. "I don't know," he said cautiously. "But when it first started, it didn't sound like a slide. I've heard them in Canada. It sounded more like—well, like *dynamite*."

WHEN TRENT pressed him further, the old man just shook his head and said, "I don't know. Could have been natural, could have been otherwise." Beyond that, he would say nothing. But Trent knew that he had his suspicions.

"How about trying to break through to the rest of the Strip?" Trent asked. "Through the Pass, I mean."

Wilson gave him a pitying look. "You ever taken a good look at the Ladrones, Jim? Dammit, man—lowest the rimrock dips to us is five hundred feet. As for the Pass—snow's forty feet deep there now. Not a chance.

"Besides—" He spread his hands in a futile gesture. "What good would it do if a man did break through? There's no way of bringing in supplies. And the Strip already knows the fix we're in here."

"Yes. But they think that you and Jeffries, together, have enough food to get the town through this. They don't know what's really going on here. A man could bring the marshal back and have him force Jeffries to at prices people can afford."

"How?" Wilson challenged. "The marshal couldn't do no more than what Sheriff Reeves has done—try to reason with Jef-

fries. And he's beyond reasoning. He's out to make a small fortune, and he knows there ain't a damn thing anyone can do about it. And so do you."

It was sound reasoning, Trent conceded. Thomas Jeffries had the town in a death grip—and he wasn't going to let go. Not as long as the wealthy operators were able to pay his prices. And to ask the operators to boycott Jeffries until he was forced to give in would be useless. As long as they had money and Jeffries had food, they would continue to pay. A man didn't quibble about money when his belly was empty.

"What's going to happen then, Tod?" he asked.

Wilson shrugged. "You ~~is~~ as good as mine. Meanwhile, if there's anything here that might help Lem's boy, you're welcome to it."

"No, he needs fresh stuff," Trent said. "But thanks just the same. Well, I'd better get going."

"Drop over some night, Jim," Wilson suggested, shaking hands. "Shelia was asking about you yesterday. Confidentially, I don't think she and Jeffries are getting along any too well."

Trent shook his head. "Some night perhaps, Tod. But right now, I'm pretty busy."

He hurried away, leaving the old man standing there, frowning. Wilson muttered something about "*Proud young fool!*" and then hurried to wait on a customer.

The group lounging in front of Jeffries' Emporium broke into excited whispers as Jim Trent crossed the street toward them. Since Doc Trent ate out, they were all wondering what business he could have with Jeffries. Unless he had finally decided to do something Jeffries and that Wilson wench.

Trent flushed, conscious of the curious eyes upon him. He knew what they were thinking—and it angered him. Dammit, why couldn't they mind their own business! You'd think he was the only man in the Cherokee Strip that had ever been jilted.

Several people spoke to him, and he replied with a brusque, "Good morning." Then realizing that they had already made their purchases, he went inside the Emporium.

The sound of a woman's voice—low and controlled, but nonetheless angry—brought

Trent up short just inside. He stood a moment, trying to adjust his eyes to the dimness, yet unable to keep from hearing Shelia Wilson's words. For he recognized her voice.

"If money means that much to you, Tom, then it's time we put an end to things. I made a mistake about you. I've suspected that for some time. Now I'm through!" There was a sharp note in her voice. "And I hope the town lynches you, Thomas Jeffries."

"Don't be a fool, Shelia," Trent heard Jeffries retort. "I can't throw this thing over now."

Then things came into focus, and Trent saw Shelia clearly for the first time in weeks. Tall for a woman, slim but with a richness of figure, copper hair cascading to her shoulders, and—as she strode angrily toward the door—sea-green eyes that met his squarely. She caught her breath, paused.

"Hello, Shelia," Trent said quietly.

"Hello, Jim." She was searching his face as though she had forgotten its contours. "Good to see you again. It's been months since you've been around."

Trent shrugged. "There wasn't much point, was there?"

"No," she said, hesitantly. "No, I guess there wasn't, *then*." There was a definite emphasis upon the last word. It was obvious that she realized he had heard her break off her engagement to Jeffries. Now, with complete frankness, she was laying her cards on the table. Cards that, in so many words, said: *I'm free again, Jim. What are you going to do about it?*

"Nor now," Trent said, and saw the slow flush rise in her face. She had literally thrown herself at him, and he had let her know that he wasn't interested. Which, he admitted, was not quite true. He was simply convinced that this little scene was being staged only to bring Jeffries to heel.

"Nice seeing you again, Shelia," he said stiffly. "Now if you'll excuse me—"

"Jim, wait!" Shelia laid an impulsive hand on his arm.

"Yes?"

"Jim, I've got to talk to you. Won't you come over to the house tonight?" Color swept up in her cheeks. "It's not about what you think—about *us*, I mean. It's about Dad. He's getting ready to do something foolish. And, Jim, I'm worried."

Trent hesitated. He was not certain that he wanted to take up where he had left off with Shelia, even in a business way. Yet the sight of her now—standing so close to him—did something. Or perhaps it was his sense of duty to Tod that made him say; "All right, Shelia. Around eight?"

"That will be fine, Jim." She gave him a slow smile. "And, Jim, you needn't be afraid of me!" Then she was gone, swallowed up by the storm outside.

FROWNING, Trent turned and strode to the counter. He had not thought that she could ever stir him thus again.

"A very touching scene—that." Tom Jeffries, seated on the edge of the counter, swung a booted foot with rhythmic ease. "She used to be able to twist me around her finger that way. But not this time!"

Trent looked at him, cold-eyed. And he thought he understood why Shelia, frontier-bred as she was, had fallen for the man. *Colorful*. Colorful in the swashbuckling fashion which frontier people liked. That was Thomas Jeffries.

A handsome man—with a trace of the *Conquistadores* in his aquiline features and the contemptuous twist of his thin mouth. His black hair was brushed straight back from his high forehead to fall, Custer fashion, to his shoulders.

He was the one man Trent had ever met whose eyes did not betray his true nature. Black, like his hair, they held a touch of the pathos of the *peon*, and made one wonder at the cruelty of the mouth. But those eyes were receptive, and Trent knew it.

Jeffries was not a storekeeper by nature. Nor did he attempt to function as one. He employed two clerks to wait on the trade, and a bookkeeper to handle the paper work. He himself did little—other than to cut a wide swath through the town's social circles. Well-educated, flattering, he had been much sought after by the younger women until his recent price-jacking move. And even now, the wealthier element still catered to him.

Yet for all his color and *peon* eyes, Trent knew that he was a dangerous and ruthless man.

Jeffries stopped swinging his foot. "You've seen me before, Trent," he said coolly. "What's on your mind—besides what

just went out through that door there?"

Trent ignored the remark. "Fill this order," he said. "I'll wait."

Jeffries' eyebrows raised as he scanned the list. "Thought you were eating at Lu Chee's place."

"I am. Those things are for the Perkins family."

"Didn't know they had that kind of money." Jeffries looked surprised.

Trent's mouth tightened. "He hasn't. But his boy has scurvy. Look, Jeffries, you've got to come down on your prices. People can't afford to pay. And they're getting sick."

"That's too bad." But Jeffries didn't look sympathetic. "But lowering my prices would be damned poor business for me, Trent. I'd sell out in a month at a small profit. Then what would I do until I could bring in new supplies next spring?"

"What are you going to do anyway?" Trent retorted. "When these people get hungry enough, they're going to be hard to handle."

Jeffries' mouth got ugly. "Anything they start, the sheriff can finish. Or if he can't—I can!" He patted the twin .45's at his hips. "Me and my clerks together. You see, Trent," his smile was twisted, "they're not just clerks!"

"Ex-gunmen, eh?" Trent was suddenly thoughtful. "Well, that's your business, Jeffries. You can meet it any way you want. I don't envy you, and I'll be on the other side when it comes to a showdown."

He looked around the place while Jeffries filled his order. The shelves were heavily stocked to the ceiling. And he knew that in the warehouse behind, there was twice again as much in reserve.

Once more that nagging suspicion began to creep into his mind. There was just too much food here in proportion to the rest of the stock. It was as though Jeffries had anticipated that slide in Grant's Pass—or had planned it. Otherwise, why would he have brought in a winter's supply at one time, instead of freighting it in as needed?

Trent's eyes narrowed as a short, slender fellow with the still eyes of a killer lugged his order to the counter. These clerks, too. Why would an honest merchant hire ex-gunmen to wait on trade? And why would a gunman *take* such a job unless he was being paid killer's wages? The whole dam-

ned thing was too pat. And it was a pattern all right—a *crooked pattern*.

"Put it here on the counter, Joe," ordered Jeffries. "I'll check it off. Let's see—flour, eggs, bacon, spinach, tomatoes, and five dozen lemons. Well, there you are, Trent." He shoved the goods across the counter. "That'll be forty-eight dollars and sixty-five cents."

Trent gave him a steady look. He expected trouble, and was prepared for it. "You and I don't figure the same way, Jeffries," he said. "I count seven dollars and ten cents, at *Tod Wilson's prices*." He drew the money from his left pocket, and the .45 from his right hip at the same time. "That's right, isn't it?"

"So *that's* the way it is," Jeffries said softly. "Take what you want with a sixgun, and at your prices, huh? Well, you're not getting away with it, Trent." Without turning, he snapped, "Keep your hands off your gun, Joe, and go get the sheriff."

"Hell, what do we need the sheriff for?" Joe exclaimed. "We can handle this ourselves."

"Go get the sheriff, Joe!" There was an edge to Jeffries' voice. "This is going to be handled legal."

Muttering, Joe slipped outside. Trent made no move to stop him.

"You're smart, Jeffries, smarter than I thought." Still keeping Jeffries covered, Trent scooped up the load of groceries. "Tell the sheriff I'll be in my office."

"I'll tell him." Jeffries smiled—an enigmatic smile that told everything—and nothing. "I'm going to like seeing you behind bars."

"Afraid I'll start trouble for you, Jeffries?" Trent said. "Is that it?"

"Could be."

Trent went as far as the door before he replied. "You'll have a hell of a time getting Ed Reeves to lock up the town's only doctor. Especially right now when he's most needed."

Jeffries shrugged. "I can try. You're not going to get away with this. If you did, half the town would be sticking a gun in my ribs and taking what they wanted at their prices."

"They'll do that sooner or later anyway," Trent said grimly, and shoved out into the storm.

"Don't put that idea in their heads,

Trent," Jeffries called after him. "Or there will be a lot of widows around town!"

Plowing through the storm, his head bent against a stiff wind from the north, Trent frowned. Damn this snow, anyway. Day after day it piled deeper and deeper in Grant's Pass!

Then his mind slipped back to Jeffries' parted warning. He knew that Jeffries was not one to make idle threats. What he said, he meant. If the town, in desperation, started trouble he and his two gunmen would finish it—with the sheriff duty-bound to back him up.

Trent scowled. Jeffries *had* been right. The town was likely to follow his, Trent's example—in which case, good men would die. But there had been no help for it.

Near the corner of Main and Oak Streets he paused—with the cold biting through his coat. Then on the point of going back and paying Jeffries his price, he changed his mind and strode swiftly toward the Perkins house.

Chapter III

TIGHTEN THE HANGNOOSE KNOT

IT WAS almost noon when he reached his office. He had delivered the groceries to Elizabeth Perkins with orders that Tommy be given one lemon a day henceforth, and then left. He had volunteered no details as to how he had gotten the food, nor had Elizabeth asked. She had been too grateful to ask questions.

A grizzled, raw-boned man of fifty was waiting for him in his reception room. Sheriff Ed Reeves looked ill-at-ease despite the star on his chest. Some people accused the sheriff of sticking too close to the book in upholding the law. But Trent admired him as an efficient lawman who did his duty as he saw it.

"Hello, Ed," said Trent, and shook hands. "Figured you'd be waiting."

"Howdy, Doc." The sheriff fidgeted uneasily. "I reckon you know why I'm here."

"Yes, I know." Trent's face was grave. "Jeffries."

The sheriff frowned. "Why'd you do it, Doc? We can't have that sort of thing going on around here, and you know it."

"What did you expect me to do, Ed?" Trent snapped. "I'm a doctor; I'm suppose

to be able to cure people. Fresh fruit was the medicine Tommy Perkins needed. I got it. And, by God, I'll—"

"That ain't the point, Doc," interrupted Reeves. He sat down and crossed his bony legs. "No matter how you feel, you got no more right to break the law than anyone else."

"Jeffries is running a legal business here. There's nothin' that says how much he can or can't charge for his goods. Maybe you don't like it, maybe I don't like it, maybe the whole damn town don't like it. But he's not breakin' any laws, Doc—and *you* are."

"To hell with the law!" Trent flared angrily. "Unless Jeffries comes down on his food, I'm going to take care of the sick the same way I did today."

Ed Reeves' jaw tightened. "You can say to hell with the law, Doc. *But that's not the way it's going to be.* Not as long as I'm sheriff. I got more reason to hate Jeffries than you have. Me—I got a wife and two kids, Doc—and *I* can't afford to pay Jeffries' prices."

The anger went out of Trent then. He picked up his hat. "Let's go, Ed. But I'm telling you, you're going to have trouble on your hands. When a man's sick, he's going to get a doctor—even if he has to spring him out of jail."

"Just a minute, Doc." Ed Reeves remained where he was. "No need to fly off the handle. Jeffries don't want you arrested. He's nobody's fool. He just lost his head. Having you jailed would be a dumb move, and he knows it."

"First place you were thinking of a sick kid. You'd have the town on your side there. Second place, he'd have folks roaring mad at him for taking the only medico in town out of circulation. Third place, if folks found out you threw down on him and took what you wanted at your price, they'd all try it. That would mean a showdown. And Jeffries don't want that yet, even though he knows I'd have to back him up."

"So?" Trent's eyes were wary.

The sheriff shifted restlessly. "So Jeffries said he'd forget everything if you'll pay that forty-one dollars difference."

Trent's lip curled. "So he wants to back down and save face at the same time! Nothing doing, Ed. If he wants to press charges, he can go right ahead."

Reeves face tightened. "That's your answer then, Doc?"

"That's my answer, Ed."

With a shrug, the sheriff rose. He hesitated, then opened the door and went outside. Trent heard his footsteps fading down the hall—slow, worried footsteps.

IT WAS five minutes of eight when Jim Trent walked up the path to Tod Wilson's house. There was a light in the front window, and he caught a glimpse of a woman's slim figure behind the curtain as he knocked.

Shelia, herself, opened the door for him. "Hello, Jim," she smiled. "You're early. Dad had some extra work at the store. He should be here any minute."

Trent said, "Hello," and followed her inside. He stood there—a little stiff, a little ill-at-ease. This was the first time in months that he had been here, and he was experiencing a sudden recurrence of old, half-forgotten memories. Now everything looked strange to him, almost as though it was the first time he had ever been here.

Shelia must have sensed his mood, for she placed her hand on his arm and said quietly, "Everything is just as it was, Jim. Nothing's changed."

He looked at her, not certain whether he loved or hated her. During the past few months, he had grown to consider her as a part of his life that no longer hurt. And his practice had kept him too busy to think about her much. Now, however—

"Nothing," he reminded her. "Except *you.*"

"Don't, Jim!" She slipped her arms around him. "I was a fool, dear."

Trent pushed her away. "I don't like to be second-choice, Shelia."

A dull pink flooded the girl's face. "I said I was sorry, Jim. But you can't blame me completely. After all, I'd had no chance to compare you with other men. Was it unfair of me to want to do that?"

Dropping into a chair, Trent studied her thoughtfully. It was obvious that she had dressed carefully for his visit. She wore her hair—as always—in a copper cascade down her shoulders. The dress—a green silk that fitted the curves of her slender figure—was cut in the latest fashion with a bustle and a low-cut neck line. There was a suspicious color to her cheeks and a touch

of rice powder around her nose. Her eyes were greener than he had ever seen them.

He retorted with a stiff curtness, "woman doesn't have to compare if she's really in love."

"But I was—I *am*, Jim!" she protested. "You see, I'm a perfectly shameless hussy. *I'm throwing myself at you now*. Haven't you sense enough to realize that?"

"Enough to realize that you broke off our engagement for another man."

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" she exclaimed impatiently. "There was nothing to that. It only took this trouble in town, and Tom Jefferies' ruthlessness to make me realize that, you idiot!"

To a woman, this would have been a perfectly reasonable explanation. But once before—in the East—this had happened to Trent. That was why he was here in a frontier town now. That was the reason he hadn't liked to have it happen to him again.

He leaned forward, changing the subject abruptly. "What's this about Tod? That's what I really came over about."

Shelia made a helpless little gesture of surrender. She had tried her best. "Dad's worried, Jim. He says there's talk—ugly talk—going around. He's afraid there's going to be trouble unless Jeffries comes down on his prices."

"He won't do that," Trent assured her. "He and I had a little trouble today, and he backed down. But he won't do it again."

"I know," Shelia's eyes shadowed. Frowning, she sat down beside him. "Look, Jim—Dad's got the idea he can help things by canvassing the ranchers around here for milk and eggs and home-canned vegetables. He's taking out two wagons in the morning to begin covering the Valley. And by offering high wholesale prices, he thinks he can buy quite a bit of food. But, Jim, I'm worried. Jeffries is bound to try and stop him."

"Why? I won't hurt Jeffries' business. Anything Tod brings back he'll sell to people who couldn't afford Jefferies' price to begin with."

"You're a fool, Jim Trent!" Shelia snapped. "Look, Dad's got nothing left but beans and flour now. Unless he can get supplies from somewhere within the next week, he'll have to close up."

"So?"

"So that's just what Jefferies wants. He's smart, Jim, and ambitious. If Dad has to close his doors, people will have to buy from Jeffries. And when those who can't pay his prices become desperate, he plans to extend them credit—at *his prices*. By spring, the town will be so far in debt to him that they'll never get out. They'll just have to keep paying a little each month on their bill and running up a new one. Dad wouldn't have a chance then—no matter how much merchandise he brought in. Now, do you understand?"

Trent frowned. This was a new angle to things. He had thought Jeffries was interested only in a quick killing—a handsome immediate profit. He was stunned by the cleverness of Jeffries' long-range scheming.

And, for the first time, he realized Tod's danger. For as long as Tod kept his doors open, Jeffries' plan wouldn't work. And Jeffries wasn't the type to let any man stand in his way, even if he had to murder him.

Trent looked at his watch. Eight-thirty. Tod should have been here by now. The old man had known that Jim Trent would be here tonight. Somehow, without alarming Shelia, he had to get out of here and check on Tod.

Rising, he said, "I just remembered, Shelia. I promised to drop around and have a look at Zeke Hill's wife. Meanwhile, tell Tod not to start on this trip tomorrow until we've talked things over. I don't like the idea."

Shelia followed him to the door where there was a moments awkward silence. Then Trent said stiffly, "Well, good night, Shelia."

Shelia sighed, "Darn you, Jim Trent!" and kissed him. "If you've got any silly ideas about ignoring me, forget them. You're going to see a lot of me from now on!"

Trent froze up inside. To him, a woman didn't break off her engagement to a man, completely forget him for five months, and then, in the space of a single evening, decide that she still loved him. That didn't make sense to him.

As he made his way down the path with rapid strides, Shelia's laughter followed him—challenging laughter. He swore, latched the gate behind him, and made his

way through the still falling snow toward Wilson's Mercantile.

THE CROWD before Tod Wilson's store was breaking up as Trent turned the corner onto Main Street. For a moment Trent thought that something had happened to Tod, but then he caught sight of Wilson's chunky figure on the steps, and he slowed his pace.

Wilson spotted him and came over. "Hello, Jim. Sorry I couldn't make it home. But something came up. Besides," he grinned slyly. "I thought maybe you and Shelia might—"

"What's happened?" Trent broke in curtly. "What was this crowd doing here?"

"Nothin', Jim." Wilson's eyes shifted. "Some of the boys was just shootin' their mouths off."

"War talk against Jeffries, maybe?"

"Look, Jim," Tod Wilson's face was serious. "You're the only doctor around here. And you're going to be needed more every day. Now why don't you stay out of this thing? Jeffries don't like you. He never did."

"And after what happened this morning, he's going to have his sights set for you. He's not the sort to forget. Best thing you can do is to stick to your sick people."

Trent's mouth thinned. "I'm capable of handling my own affairs, Tod. Now, what's this talk about you taking wagons out to canvass the ranches for extra supplies? You ought to know Jeffries won't let you get away with anything like that."

"How's he going to stop me, Jim?"

"What do you think he's got Joe Masters and Shorty Nesbitt around for?" Trent snapped. "Hell, they're not clerks, they're killers! This thing is all planned, Tod. Jeffries is just waiting for you to make a false move."

Wilson scowled. "If he stars anything, Jim, the town will take him apart."

Trent laughed shortly. "You mean they'd try. But that's as far as they would get. Jeffries would fight back with his two gunmen, and the sheriff would have to back him up. When it was all over, Tod, Jeffries would still be on top."

Uncertainty swept Wilson's face. Then the square line of his jaw hardened. "I'm takin' those wagons out tomorrow, Jim. And the law won't be on Jeffries' side if he

jumps us. That's what the meetin' was about. We sort of expect trouble, and we're going prepared for it. There'll be a half dozen men on each wagon with rifles."

Angered by Wilson's stubborn determination, Trent said sharply, "Look, Tod. Use your head. Why do you think the ranchers haven't already brought their surplus food into town? They know how things stand here, and that they could make a good profit on everything they brought in. Why haven't they then? *Because, dammit, Jeffries and his gunmen have warned them against it.*"

"You're talking through your hat, Jim!" protested Wilson. "You got no proof of that."

"For God's sake, Tod—how much more proof do you want than the fact that Will Henshaw was killed three weeks ago on the way into town with a load of beef and canned goods? And that his wagon and everything in it was burned. Who do you think did that—someone like Lem Perkins?"

"I don't know," Tod said defensively. "But you still got no proof."

"You fool!" Trent snapped. "You take those wagons out tomorrow and you'll have plenty of proof, *if you live to get back!*"

"You got any *other* ideas, Jim?" Wilson's voice was cold. "Or are you willing to let folks starve as long as you keep your own belly full?"

Had Wilson been a younger man, Trent would have gone for him then and there. As it was, his mouth merely thinned to a bitter line. Without replying, he spun on his heel and walked away with long, ground-burning strides.

Tod Wilson's accusation had infuriated him. But what was worse, he knew that—although violence was not the answer—he had nothing better to offer.

Two huge freighting wagons, each carrying heavily armed men, pulled out of town the next morning, their wheels sinking deeply into the snow. With huge drifts piled deep over most of the country, it was likely to be tough going before they returned.

From his office window, Jim Trent watched their departure—and cursed Tod Wilson for a fool. Those armed guards might just as well stay at home. Jeffries

was too smart a man to attempt a *direct* attack on the wagons. Nor did he have enough men if he wanted to. No. He would strike, as was his nature, treacherously. Sniping from the hills, probably.

Frowning, Trent swung away from the window. Yet he knew that he had no right to condemn Tod Wilson. At least Tod was *trying* to do something about things. Jim Trent was merely sitting around letting Jeffries have his own way.

The thought angered him. Swinging back to the window, he stared for perhaps fifteen minutes at the Sierra Ladrone. Tod Wilson's words kept creeping into his mind:

A man couldn't get through to the outside, Jim. Why, the closest the rimrock gets to the valley floor is a good five hundred feet—and that's straight up! And even if he got out, it wouldn't do no good. He couldn't get my supplies back in again.

Trent's jaw hardened. He had been an experienced amateur mountain-climber in the East. It had been his hobby. He was willing to gamble his life that he could get through. And once outside—

Thoughtfully, he slipped into his coat and went out into the cold morning air. Already a half-formed plan was beginning to develop in his mind.

Chapter IV

MURDER MOUNTAIN

TOD WILSON'S two freighting wagons limped back into town just before sunset—the lead wagon minus a horse and Wilson lying in back with a bullet through his chest.

The town—that had watched him leave with so much unspoken hope—waited, bleak-eyed now, as the wagons drew to a halt before Wilson's Mercantile. There, one of the grim-faced drivers gave them the story in a few terse words.

Trouble had started when they reached the Lazy J. While Wilson was bargaining with Ned Pierce, Lazy J owner, someone had cracked down on them from the hills with a rifle. A good three hundred yards—which meant a skilled marksman.

Ned Pierce had caught a bullet in the head and died instantly. Tod Wilson had stopped a slug in the chest and was in a

bad way. In addition, one of the horses had been killed by a stray bullet.

They hadn't spotted the rifleman, although his trail had been like an open book. Cutting the dead horse out of harness, they had limped back into town. There the killer's trail had merged with others in the trampled snow. But there was no doubt but that he had come from town, and returned to town. That he was here now.

Returning from Bob Johnson's place with the disheartening diagnosis of three more cases of scurvy, Jim Trent was greeted with word of this new tragedy—and its grim portent.

Inside the store, he found Tod already stretched out on the counter. It took only a cursory examination to tell Trent the old man was dying. The slug had punctured both lungs. Only a miracle had kept Tod alive this long.

For a moment Trent stood staring down into the round, kindly face, remembering that Tod had never done anything but good in his life. And now when Tod was dying, there was nothing he, Jim Trent—with all his medical knowledge—could do to save him.

Shoulders drooping, he turned to the silent rim of people. "Anyone know where Miss Shelia is?" he asked.

"She's down at Lem Perkins' place, Doc," a lanky roustabout volunteered. "Some of the women have gone for her."

She'll never get here in time, Trent thought. In a way he was glad. It would be better this way. He stood there, helpless, watching the blood bubbling through Tod's lips until at last the harsh, grating breathing ceased altogether.

He faced the crowd then, his eyes going from one grim face to another. "Tod Wilson's dead," he said in a flat voice. "There's nothing more I can do here." Slipping his .45 from its holster, he checked the cylinder, then dropped it back in place. "One of you go after the undertaker. And when Miss Shelia gets here, have some of the women take her home."

He was halfway to the door when the lanky roustabout called after him, "Want that some of us should go with you, Doc?"

Trent said, "No—this is personal," and went outside.

Tight little knots of men crowded the streets, talking in hushed voices. As Trent

came out of the Mercantile, their voices died away. But Trent knew that they were only waiting for him to make the first move against Jeffries. Tod Wilson had been a friend to every man here.

Slowly Trent crossed the street toward Jeffries' Emporium. He did not hurry. He knew what he intended to do, and he was going about it with a level head. Yet it was not easy; Tod Wilson had been like a father to him. No, it was not easy to keep down the blood lust within him now.

Especially when he knew who the killer was. And he had no doubt as to that. For only the ex-gunman, Joe Masters, could kill with a rifle at that distance. And Joe worked for Tom Jeffries. Which meant that Joe had only squeezed the trigger. Jeffries was the real murderer. It was Jeffries he wanted now.

He was halfway across the street when Ed Reeves came out of the Emporium. The sheriff looked worried, and the frown deepened on his face at sight of Trent. He stood on the steps, waiting.

As Trent, deliberately ignoring him, crossed the porch Reeves blocked his path. His face was grim. "You ain't goin' in there, Doc," he said. "You're huntin' trouble 'thout any proof. I ain't goin' to stand for it."

Their eyes locked belligerently for a moment. Then Trent said quietly, "I've always respected you, Ed. You've enforced the law as you saw it—and I've abided by it. But this time you're seeing it wrong. Now get out of my way."

The scatter-gun in Reeves' hands came up, lining squarely on Trent's chest. "Stay where you are, Doc." He did not raise his voice. "There ain't another man in the country owes you what I do. You brought one of my kids into the world. You saved my wife's life. But this is a big thing."

"*I said—get out of my way, Ed!*" There was steel in Trent's voice now. "I'm going in there."

The sheriff's finger curled around the scatter-gun's trigger. "You take one more step, Doc, and I'll kill you."

Trent hesitated. He knew Ed Reeves and his strict ideas of justice. And Ed wasn't bluffing now. Right or wrong—until the sheriff had proof of Jeffries' guilt in Wilson's murder—he wasn't going to tolerate violence.

"Now get this, Doc," Reeves said. "If Jeffries had anything to do with those shootings, I'll pin it on him sooner or later. And I'll see that he's punished in accordance with the law."

His face flushed as Trent's lip curled. "What you *think* you know, Doc, is one thing. What we got *proof* of, is another." He gave Trent a grim look, then continued. "You're popular with folks around here, Doc. Damn popular. You go in there now and get yourself killed and the town will go after Jeffries like mad dogs. And I'd have to back him up."

"They might get him, but a lot of folks would die first. I ain't goin' to have bloodshed. Use your head, Doc. Go back to your pill passing and let me handle this thing."

Trent paused. His desire for revenge was battling with the logic of what Ed Reeves had just said. Because he was a sensible man, logic won out.

He said, "You've got just three days, Ed, to get proof of Jeffries' guilt. I'm giving you that. *No more,*" and he walked away.

Ed Reeves' voice reached after him—grim, unrelenting. "You'll give me as long as I need, Doc. *I'm the law!*"

Without replying, Trent strode back across the street to Wilson's Mercantile. The little knots of men watched him silently. They understood that Trent could have done nothing more, under the circumstances, than what he had done. Most of them realized, too, that Ed Reeves was a good lawman, acting only as he saw things.

But their mood was ugly. Their families were hungry; a man who had been their friend had been ruthlessly murdered, and sickness was breaking out all over town. Things were building up to an ugly climax—a climax that would end with the streets running with the blood of good men and bad.

SMOKE was pluming up from the chimney of Lem Perkins' house as Jim Trent headed into the cold morning air. The snow had stopped, but a stiff wind swept down the deserted street. Men were sitting around firesides, staring at empty food shelves and nurturing the mounting hate in their hearts.

Passing Jeffries' Emporium, Trent

noticed that the windows had been shuttered with stout planking and the heavy door reinforced. Tom Jeffries was expecting trouble, and he was prepared for it.

Trent's mouth thinned to a bitter slash. Jeffries could avoid bloodshed now by advancing credit to the town, even at his own prices. Or better still, he could bring his prices down to a reasonable level.

But Jeffries *wanted* trouble. He wanted to prove—regardless of the cost in blood—that he held the upper hand in Winter Valley. That the town's existence depended upon him as its master. Then and only then—when their spirit was broken—would he advance credit on his own terms.

As Trent came abreast of the Emporium, Jeffries, himself, came out onto the porch. At sight of Trent his eyes narrowed. He called, "Just a minute, Trent!"

Trent paused, his coat swinging open in the wind to reveal the bone-handled .45. "Yes?"

"Understand you were looking for me last night," Jeffries said. His hands were resting easily on his hips, close to his guns. "Something on your mind?"

Trent gave him a steady look. "Nothing important. Just *murder!*"

"Murder?" Jeffries' eyebrows went up. "Oh. You mean Wilson." He shook his head. "Sorry to hear about that. Going to make it hard on Sheila."

"But harder on the man who killed Tod, and Nielson," said Trent.

They stood facing one another—neither speaking, neither making a move toward his gun. Each was waiting for the other to make the first move. There wasn't room for both of them here in Winter Valley, and they knew it.

Suddenly Jeffries relaxed. "So?" His voice was half challenging. "Any idea who did it?"

"I *know*," Trent retorted. "And I know who paid him to do it."

"Yeah?" Jeffries' eyes still had the look of an innocent *peon*, but a hardness had crept into his voice. "Why don't you do something about it then? Or maybe you're scared and backing down?"

Trent's smile was humorless. "Like you did yesterday, Jeffries?"

Anger colored Jeffries' face. He was holding himself in check with difficulty. Trent could see that. "That was just a

business deal," Jeffries retorted. "Not *murder*, as you call this."

"Don't worry," Trent said, turning away. "Ed Reeves has just three days to connect you with Tod Wilson's murder. If you're not in jail at the end of that time, I'll be around to see you—and Joe!"

Jeffries' voice reached after him as he walked away. "Any time, Trent, anyplace. And in any language you like—sixgun talk included!"

Trent did not hear him. His mind was already engrossed with the plan that was now running through his mind. A plan that might succeed if Lem Perkins—*young, strong, and steady*—would go along with him.

Early morning sunlight laid a thin white line across Lem Perkins' cleft chin. He stood with one arm resting on the stone mantel and looked at Trent. Then his eyes shifted—first to his wife, and then to young Tommy, under the blanket.

Trent knew what he was thinking. Lem had a wife and boy to worry about. "As I told you, Lem," he said quietly. "It's dangerous and it may not work. If you'd rather not, I'll understand. But two men have a much better chance of making it than one."

A slow smile crinkled Lem's homely face. "Here's the way I look at it, Doc," he drawled. "If it works, it works. If it don't—well, my life ain't so important to the world. I'm your man, Doc."

"Thanks," Trent said, and turned to Elizabeth who had stood silent during the conversation. Elizabeth said quietly, "I'd be ashamed of him if he didn't go, Doctor Trent."

Trent thanked her with his eyes. Turning to Lem, he said, "All right, Lem. Fifty-three tomorrow morning at my office. And don't forget those spikes for our shoes."

Lem nodded as he led the way to the door. "I won't forget, Doc."

Outside, Trent paused a moment. Then he made his way slowly toward Tod Wilson's home.

He spent half an hour with Sheila, surprised and relieved to find her taking her father's death so well. It seemed that Tod's passing had left her determined to carry on where he had left off.

"Dad's death didn't come as such a shock to me, Jim," she told him. "I'd been ex-

pecting something like that to happen. And since he had to die, I'm glad he did so trying to help other people. I'll keep the store open as long as I can. When spring comes, I'll bring in new supplies and give them away, if that's what it takes to beat Jeffries."

As for his proposed attempt to break through to the outside, she was frankly worried. "It's dangerous, Jim—awfully dangerous. And now that Dad's gone, you're all I have left. I can't have anything happen to you too, Jim. Be careful, please."

Beyond this single reference, neither she nor Jim mentioned their feeling for one another. Yet they both knew that their love was alive and strong. After this thing was all over—

Trent left with a warm feeling playing around his heart. As he made his way along the deserted street, his boots clicking loudly on the boardwalk, the warmth gradually faded.

Jim Trent had exactly three days to break through to the town of Cherokee and get back here with supplies. If he failed, he would be forced to lead a group of innocent men to their deaths against Jeffries' stronghold. And there'd be a hangman's noose waiting for those who survived if Jeffries was killed.

Chapter V

FOOD—FOR THE BUZZARDS!

DAWN WAS just thrusting above the Ladrones as two shadowy figures slipped out of town and headed across the open prairie. Each carried a lariat over his

shoulder, and the sound of their steel-spiked drillers' boots upon the hard-packed snow cut sharply through the stillness. Lem Perkins had done a good job on the improvised mountain-climbing cleats.

No one saw them go. No one knew their purpose save two women—each tossing, sleepless, in her bed—praying that her man would return.

Marlow first began to suspect that something was wrong when Jim Trent had not turned up at his office by noon. Doctor Jim was not one to sleep late nor to neglect the sick.

A check at his hotel proved fruitless. The desk clerk had not seen Trent since he had turned in the night before. A round of the stores—and later of the town in general—revealed nothing.

To all appearances, Doctor Jim Trent had disappeared.

Only two people knew the truth—Shelia Wilson and Elizabeth Perkins—and both were honor-bound not to talk.

In the first flush of excitement, the town jumped to the conclusion that Trent had met with foul play at Tom Jeffries' hands. And it took all of Ed Reeve's persuasive powers, backed up with a scatter-gun, to prevent a mob from storming Jeffries' Emporium.

Meanwhile, Trent's disappearance remained as much a mystery to Jeffries as to the rest of the town. And in a way, it worried him just as much. He had the uncomfortable feeling that Trent was up to something. And this feeling became more acute when word spread that Lem Perkins was also missing.

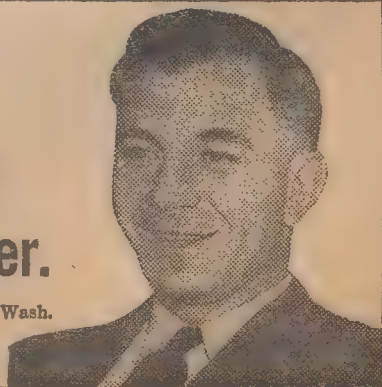
But if he had hoped that Elizabeth Perkins would give away the secret he-

JOE NYE*

has switched to Calvert because Calvert is mellower.

*of N. 5309 Whitehouse, Spokane, Wash.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain
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was due for a disappointment. For not even under the sheriff's relentless questioning would Lem's wife give any hint as to her husband's whereabouts. She kept saying, "If he'd a wanted you or anyone to know where he went, he'd a told you!"

After that, she and Shelia Wilson kept a tight silence in the face of scattered rumors that Lem and Trent had deserted the town and holed up comfortably on one of the outlying ranches. It was not easy. But then they were frontier women whose lives had never been easy.

Meanwhile, a half dozen new cases of scurvy broke out. Then, to make matters worse, Shelia Wilson was forced to close her father's store. She did this only when not a single pound of flour or beans remained on the bare shelves.

This was on the third day after Trent's and Lem Perkin's disappearance. And with the closing of Wilson's Mercantile, the town's spirit crumbled. Until now, people had known that they could always depend upon Wilson's store for a little flour and beans to keep them going. Now, however, they were faced with no alternative but to buy from Tom Jeffries at his prices—or starve.

It was then that Jeffries made his move. Coming out onto the porch of the Emporium, he broke the news to the crowd of queued-up people. In order to keep the town from starving, he told them, he would advance credit to any man who had a job. Customers, however, would be required to pay half their bill as they bought. The remainder of the account would be carried on the books until such time as it could be retired.

The crowd, remembering those loaded shelves in the Emporium, went wild. Their hatred of Jeffries and the cold-blooded murder of Tod Wilson was temporarily forgotten. They cheered Jeffries while he stood there, flanked by his two killers. They would have continued to cheer had not Shelia Wilson jumped up on the porch and lashed out at them with biting contempt.

"You fools!" she raged. "Why do you think Jeffries is doing this? Because he wants to help you? Did he offer you credit as long as my father was alive and we had a pound of flour left? No! He waited until you *had* to buy from him. That's the

reason he killed my father. So you would *have* to buy from him!"

The little gunman, Joe, scowled and took a step toward her—but Jeffries waved him back. To shut the girl up now would be an admission that he was afraid of her, and of what she had to say.

Shelia's lip curled as she looked the crowd over. "What are you cheering Jeffries for anyway? He's extending you credit, yes. But he hasn't come down on his prices, has he? *No. And he never will.*

"By spring, you'll all be so deeply in debt to him that you'll never be able to pay out. That's what he wants, a permanent stranglehold on the town. And that's what he'll have if you accept these terms of his. If you've got any courage, you'll starve before you do that."

Frowning, men looked at one another, and a low, ominous murmur rolled through the crowd. Someone yelled: "By god, she's right! Me, I ain't buyin' on those terms!"

"Nor me!" a bearded tool dresser shouted. "If I can't buy at an honest price, then, by God, I'll *take* what I want and to hell with this Jeffries son!"

With an angry roar, the crowd surged forward—their mood changed in a matter of minutes. Where they had regarded Jeffries as a savior a moment before, they now wanted his blood.

FLANKED by Joe Masters and Shorty Nesbitt, Jeffries fell back toward the protection of the store. "Don't be fools!" he shouted. "You're letting a stupid girl talk you right into a coffin.

"I'm giving you a chance to eat when you're starving. If you don't like my terms, that's your business. But if you start trouble, me and my boys here will be fighting with the sheriff backing us up. And a good many of you will die. Don't forget that. Now if you—"

The crowd shouted him down angrily. On the porch Joe and Shorty had their guns out now—eager, waiting. The showdown that Jeffries secretly wanted was at hand.

Then someone suddenly yelled, "Hold it, boys! Here comes the sheriff! And—holy smokes, that's Doc Trent with him!"

The crowd fell back and opened up to let Ed Reeves, Trent, and the stocky, gray-haired man accompanying them through. Someone spotted the gold badge on the

gray-haired man's shirt and exclaimed, "Say, that's the U. S. Marshal from Cherokee. How in hell did he get here?" Jeffries saw that badge, too, and his face paled.

The news circulated quickly through the crowd that somehow, somehow Doc Trent had managed to break through to the outside.

Stumbling a little from exhaustion, Jim Trent followed the sheriff through the crowd. His eyes were red-rimmed and beneath the heavy growth of beard a long, jagged rock tear was visible. He had gotten that when he had slipped seventy-five feet from the valley rim.

He ran his hand across his eyes, now, conscious of the steadying hand of Rand Cushman, the U. S. Marshal. At the moment, he wanted nothing more than to fall across a bed and sleep for the next forty-eight hours.

The climb to the valley rim, clawing at sheer, ice-covered rock with the knowledge that a slip meant certain death. . . . The fifteen mile trek through the Ladrone in knee deep snow. . . . The arrival in Cherokee, more dead than alive. . . . All these nightmarish details he wanted to forget. But first there was a job to be done.

Before the Emporium, the trio halted. The crowd, silent now, waited expectantly—knowing that something big was about to break. Only Shelia Wilson made a move. With a little cry, she ran to Trent.

"Jim! Jim, are you all right? What's happened?"

"Get away from here, Shelia," Trent said wearily. "There's going to be trouble."

"But, Jim! I—"

"I said—get going, Shelia!" Turning to a skinny little roustabout, Trent snapped, "Take her down to Lem Perkins' place, Rufe. And tell Elizabeth that Lem's safe. He'll be in later this evening."

Shelia placed her hand on his arm. "I'll go, Jim. But, be careful—*please*. And don't forget—I'll be waiting, Jim." The crowd opened up to let her through, then closed in again with grim purpose.

On the Emporium veranda, Jeffries—flanked by his now jittery gunmen—faced Ed Reeves. His mouth was a thin, ugly line and the *peon* look was gone from his eyes.

"As a law-abiding citizen, I'm asking you

to break up this crowd, sheriff," he snapped. "If you can't do it, I'll expect you—and that U. S. Marshal with you—to back me up in case of trouble. This thing is none of my doing."

Ed Reeves spat and hitched at his gun belt. "Reckon you know you're lying about that last part," he said. "The whole damned trouble is your doing, Jeffries."

"You're crazy!" Jeffries retorted. "I'm not begging these people to buy from me. But if they do, I've got a right to set my own prices! I—"

Trent tensed as Rand Cushman, the U. S. Marshal, shoved forward. "You've got no right, however, to seal in towns for the winter to suit your own purposes," Cushman said flatly. "And that's what you did. You dynamited Grant's Pass, Jeffries. The driver in Hobson's lead wagon was killed, and a dozen men who know you by sight in Cherokee swore they saw you running away just before the blast!"

Jeffries' face paled. "That's a lie!" he snapped. "And I can prove it!"

Watching, Trent saw Joe and Shorty begin to ease back toward the door—and knew that there was going to be trouble. Slowly, in order not to attract attention, he slipped his own gun free. He threw a quick glance at Ed Reeves. The sheriff was cradling his scatter-gun easily—the double barrels lined on the two gunhawks. Ed Reeves was no fool either.

"Maybe—but I doubt it." Cushman's voice was grim. "Meanwhile, I'm arresting you for the dynamiting of Grant's Pass and the murder of that wagon driver. I'm also holding you in connection with the killing of Will Henshaw, Nielson, and Tod Wilson."

He held out his hand. "Give your guns, Jeffries. I'm locking you up, and these two killers of yours along with you!"

For a split second Jeffries just stared at him. Then with a strangled cry, he yelled, "Let him have it, boys!" and ducked inside the store.

THINGS happened fast then—so fast that in less than five seconds two men lay dead and two others sprawled in the snow, their blood staining the street.

Simultaneously, Joe and Shorty began shooting. Cushman went for his gun, but a bullet knocked him off the porch before

he could draw. As Shorty spun, Ed Reeves let go with the scatter-gun from its elbow-rest, almost cutting Shorty in two. Joe, also caught in the blast, went to his knees, still firing. He triggered a fast shot at Reeves and the sheriff went down.

But Joe's triumph was short-lived. As he staggered back for the shelter of the store, Jim Trent cut him down with a bullet through the heart. Joe went crashing back against the barred door, and slowly slid to a sitting position, dead.

Trent shouted to the crowd, "Scatter!" and hit the veranda. Jeffries almost got him with a bullet through one of the window loop-holes. Trent went down on his belly barely in time to avoid a hail of lead that would have finished him.

He lay there, safe for the moment from Jeffries' guns. The crowd, meanwhile, held its fire for fear of hitting him. Suddenly it dawned upon him that by charging forward, he had placed himself in a dangerously awkward position. For now if he attempted to retreat across the open street, Jeffries would cut him down from inside. On the other hand, it would be suicide to barge in through that open door. The advantage would all be Jeffries'.

He lay there, cursing his stupidity, and tried to figure some way out of this trip. From inside, Jeffries taunted softly, "Well, Doctor, what now? It's your move!"

Sprawled on his belly, Trent could see the long barrel of Jeffries' .45 thrust through a loop-hole in the shuttered window. Keeping close against the wall, he got to his knees and worked his way forward until he was to one side and just below the loop-hole.

Jeffries must have heard him for he shouted, "What's the matter, Trent? Scared? Why don't you come in?" The Colt barrel wove in a searching arc.

"I think I will!" Trent retorted, and snapped an angle shot through the loop-hole. There was a *spang* as the heavy slug bounced off Jeffries' gun, and then a sharp cry came from inside. Trent's bullet, ricocheting off the gun barrel, had scored a freak hit on Jeffries.

Already moving with the shot, Trent jumped to his feet, thrust his .45 through the loop-hole, and trigged three quick slugs inside a well-spaced arc. Then even as he did so, he remembered that Jeffries was a

two-gun man, and jerked his head hastily aside.

Only that quick thinking action saved him. Flame spouted from Jeffries' other gun at point-blank range—searing Trent's head. Then the Colt barrel disappeared, and Trent made for the door with long, pantherish strides.

He was banking on Jeffries' wound and confusion now. If he could get inside and spot Jeffries before Jeffries had a chance to gun him down, he would at least have an even break.

But he had underestimated Jeffries' cunning. For, like him, Jeffries was counting on the surprise element. The result was a surprise to both.

As Trent charged the door from the outside, Jeffries crashed through from the inside. They met in a head-on collision that hurled them both to their knees, half-dazed.

Jeffries, blood staining his shirt from Trent's lucky shot through the loop-hole, fired even as he fell. But he was already bad hit—and his shot went wild. Before he could fire again, Trent caught him with a bullet through the heart. The heavy slug drove him back against the wall, flattening him there an instant before he crashed forward on his face.

WITH the last echos of gun-fire, the crowd emerged from the various points of shelter. A group quickly surrounded Trent, asking him if he was all right, eager to do anything to help.

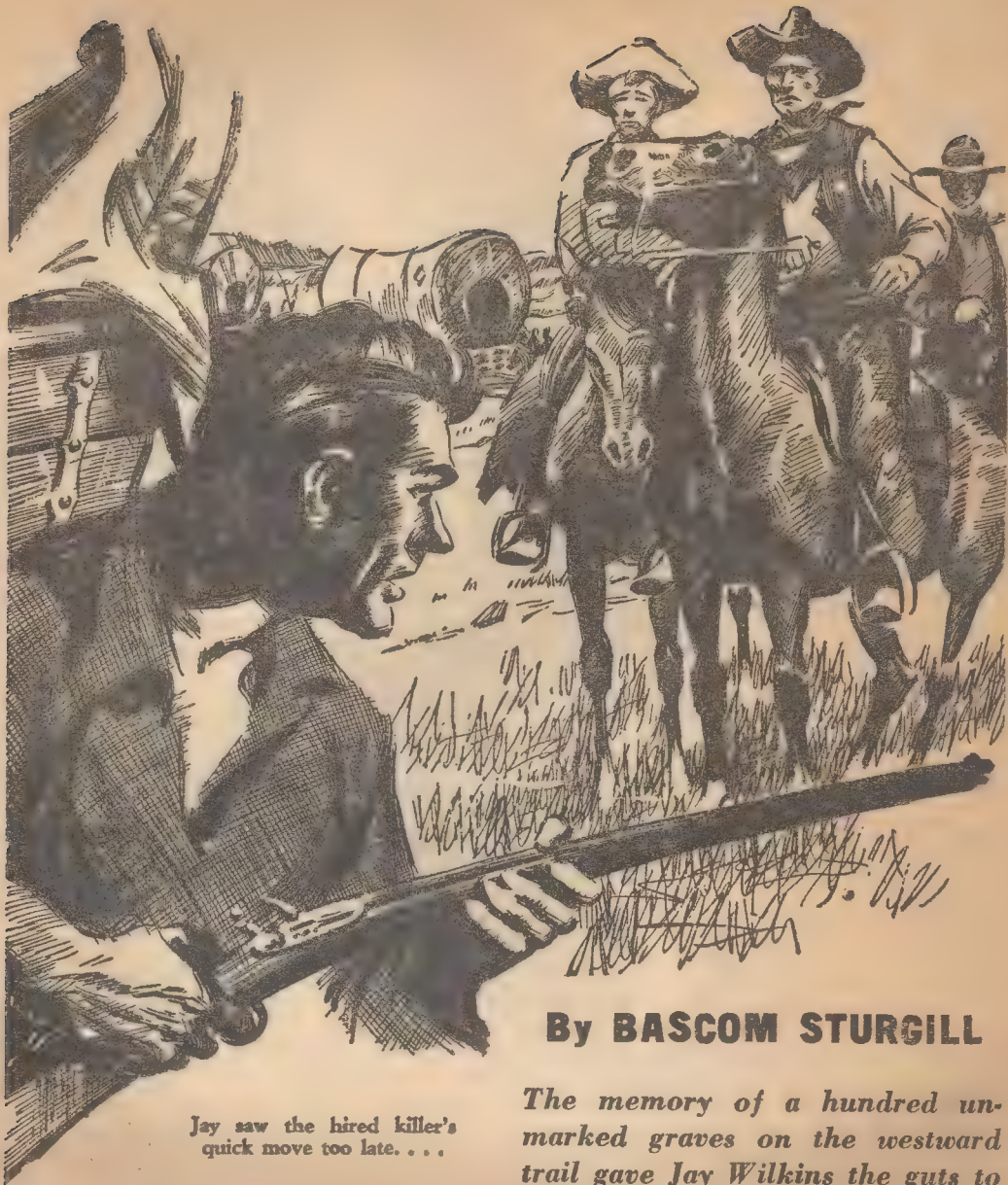
Others gathered around the sheriff and Cushman, the U. S. Marshal. Both were alive, although pretty well shot up. "Hey, Doc!" a man shouted. "You got a couple of patients here! Think you're able to handle 'em?"

Trent hurried over to the wounded men. Ed Reeves had a nasty scalp wound and Cushman a slug high in the cest. Both needed immediate attention, but they would live.

"Take them inside the Emporium," Trent ordered. "And someone go to my office and get my bag. Cushman can't be moved that far."

As a man hurried to comply and willing hands carried Reeves and Cushman inside, Trent turned to the crowd. He spoke rapidly for he had work to do yet.

(Continued on page 129)



Jay saw the hired killer's quick move too late. . . .

BLAKE ANSON and his gun-men would be coming again today . . . sure they would. They would come riding across the burned range, horses lathered with sweat, eyes cold with killing. And this time their visit would be a ruthless,

By BASCOM STURGILL

The memory of a hundred unmarked graves on the westward trail gave Jay Wilkins the guts to lift his squirrel-gun once more to save the soil which he lived on—and which would be good enough to die on, beneath the snarling lead of a cattle-baron's killer-crew.

WAGON POST

devastating attack, against which the only defense was flight . . . disgraceful, premeditated flight that a man could never live down in his own heart.

And Jay Wilkins couldn't say that he hadn't been warned a-plenty. Yesterday they had held him at gunpoint while they burned his buildings and wild hay cocks. They hadn't meant to burn the range, because it fed their own roving herds, but the winds had risen and breathed upon it with fiery insistence. That had angered them all the more, and Jay knew that he was lucky to have gotten away with his life.

He should have gone last night. No sensible man would have waited for the embers of his home to cool. But Jay Wilkins was stubborn. You could see that about him, in the mighty wedge of his shoulders, in the cant of his blond head, and in the steadfastness of his eyes.

All night long he had lain as a man in a trance, looking up at the close brightness of the Texas stars, hearing the brush sounds and thinking.

He had thought of his little hillside farm back in the rocky valleys of his Kentucky Mountain home, of how terribly hard it had been to scratch a living from those up-ended acres. No room for a man to grow back there, no room for children who were coming up into the land of need.

But here was land for them all . . . land that had never known the graceful turning of a mold board plow, fallow land that was begging for bountiful harvests. A lonely land, a land that was meant to be lived upon.

Two years ago the wagons had started coming, from everywhere, by two's and three's at first, then in great caravans that rolled majestically across the distant horizons like the onrush of mighty sailing armadas. They had stopped briefly with him, for repair and rest, then pushed westward again, leaving a wide trail in their dusty wake. And of their necessity his homestead had become a wagon post, containing among many things a store, a smithy and fresh water.

It was only then that Blake Anson had taken a hand. For Blake Anson hated farmers. He didn't want the grass roots turned up to the sun, because it destroyed the range for his cattle. The post, he had said quite bluntly, would have to go . . . and

Jay Wilkins would have to go with it. Well, the post was a smouldering heap of ashes now, and Jay Wilkins had learned how utterly foolish it was to buck Blake Anson and his hard bitten gun crew.

About three o'clock in the afternoon he observed the first great, white canvas spreads of another wagon train moving across the undulant terrain a few miles to the east. He should have sighted them long ago, but he hadn't. He had been too occupied with his troubles.

In another hour or so these new argonauts would arrive and pitch their wagons for the night. They would be weary, and perhaps a little irritable within themselves, because the day had been a hot one. They would look upon the ruins of his post and tell him how sorry, now terribly sorry, they were that all this had happened. Some of them would curse all cattlemen in general and Blake Anson in particular. And in the morning they would continue their journey, not a little annoyed that he had been unable to replenish their supplies. His trouble, after all, was no concern of theirs.

HE WAITED until the turning wheels had ceased their squeaking and the great wagons were ringed about for the night. He waited until a small group of people stood before him with dismay etched on their weary faces. Then he said, "Howdy, folks."

A tall, flat muscled man with thick, graying whiskers and penetrating eyes stepped forward. "How'd it happen?" he demanded.

And Jay answered briefly, "Cattlemen . . . they said I was givin' too much aid to the sod-busters."

"You mean they burned you out . . . because of us?" Incredulity moved in the older's voice.

"And told me to get," Jay replied quietly. "Said this would always be cattie country."

The older man's calloused fingers stirred the depths of his whiskers, scratching thoughtfully, eyes scanning the broad sweep of Cold River Basin.

"My name's Fallon, son . . . Arch Fallon . . . and where I come from folks would call them feudin' ways. Off-hand, I would say this was good farmin' land, too."

Jay flushed slightly. "One man can't

buck a dozen guns," he remarked acidly.

Fallon continued to measure distance with his eyes. "Never knowed a Kaintucky man to run from guns . . . and I heerd back a ways that you was from Kaintucky. From Lonesome Creek in Knott County myself."

Jay's heart skipped a beat. Homefolks . . . folks from Kentucky, squirrel hunters . . . dead shots with their long rifles. He stepped up and grasped Arch Fallon's horny hand.

"Jay Wilkins is my name, Mr. Fallon," he said, "and I'm sure glad to meet you folks."

Old Arch Fallon smiled. "This here is my gal," he motioned toward the tall, dark haired girl who stood firmly beside him. "And I'll introduce these other folks soon's we get fires a-goin' and victuals smellin' the air."

Jay moved his eyes over to rest on Jean Fallon, and found it hard to pull them away.

"Seein' as how you're burned out," Arch Fallon was saying heartily, "mebbe you'd best have supper with us. How about it, Jean, can we set us another plate?"

The girl didn't answer at once, and Jay observed that she was studying him with an unnatural attention. It gave him a queer feeling, made him drop his eyes.

"It might perk Maw up a bit to talk to him," she said, in a non-committal tone that was like a slap in the face to Jay.

Old Arch Fallon glanced quickly at his daughter, fingering the meaning behind her words, then said hastily to Jay, "You kin go over to the wagon and talk to Maw . . . while Jean's rustlin' the pots and pans?"

Jay hesitated, and quite unconsciously his eyes swept out across the burnt range to the south, but no sign of riders did he see out there. "For just a minute," he said in clipped accents. "But don't trouble yourselves to set a plate for me."

Something was stirring within Jay, some elemental sense of failure that had been heightened by his encounter with the Fallons. It went deeper than the mere loss of his property, was a kind of emotional unrest that he found hard to peg.

Maw Fallon, he found, was a cheerful old lady, despite the gnawing pain of a broken hip. Her hair was snow white and drawn in a tight little knot at the base of a thin

neck. Her eyes, brown and warm like Jay's own mother, looked across the endgate at him.

"Climb up, my boy, and take a seat," she said graciously. "You look kind of tuckered out."

Jay doffed his hat respectfully, stood watching the swift play of her fingers above the needlework, and for the first time today it dawned on him just how tired he really was.

"I reckon the last twenty-four hours ain't been none too easy, ma'am," he replied with an apathy that surprised him.

The little old lady didn't glance up from her knitting. "Yes, I know, I could hear you-all talking out there. Will you be leavin' soon?"

Her straightforward question startled Jay. All day long he had been trying to avoid facing that problem squarely. He had just kept putting it off, lingering, hoping for a miracle that would not come. He was looking back across all those long, lonely years that it had taken him to build up his place here, sorting out the dreams that he had salvaged from the ash heap.

He stood so long without answering that Maw Fallon spoke again. "Lots of folks crowded with homeseekers. Two months and ten day we been on the road, sleeping out nights and with none too much to eat. Saw many a new-made grave back that way, too, some without so much as a board marker. It kind of tears your heart out, little by little, like unraveling this ball of yarn."

Jay said, "I know, ma'am. I've seen 'em pass here . . . day after day."

Maw Fallon nodded. "Folks kind of looked forward to reaching your place, Mr. Wilkins. It was a spot where they could rest a few days, if need be, and fill up their kitchen gourds again. Might work a powerful hardship on some of them . . . not finding you here."

Jay felt anger rising within him. What were these people trying to do? Goad him into making a stand against Blake Anson? Prod him into almost certain death?

Sure, he knew as well as anybody that he'd be missed, that many a child would go hungry and many a wagon break down because he was no longer here to render assistance. But that was not his primary concern now. A man had only one life to live,

and if he threw it away by some foolish gesture that bordered on bravado, what good would it do him? A dead man was a long time dead . . . and a live one had to look out for himself.

"When will your cattlemen be coming back?" Maw Fallon asked softly.

And Jay's anger overflowed a bit. "Sundown," he answered, bitterly aware of the undisturbed thrust of the needle in her fingers. "But I don't reckon you folks need worry. They won't bother you . . . you ain't plannin' to settle hereabouts."

At the bitterness in his voice, a slow smile touched Maw Fallon's thin lips. "We've all got our troubles, Mr. Wilkins, and I'm sure you'll work out of yours somehow. Will you tell Paw to come lift me out of the wagon. I want to see some of this pretty land."

Jay turned away, somehow more embittered than ever by Maw Fallon's silken innuendos. For beneath the soft purr of her words and the quietness of her manner he had felt the claws scratching at him, scratching like an old lap-fed cat. To hell with her . . . to hell with them all, if that's the way they felt!

He stopped for a moment by the chip fire that Jean Fallon had struck near the wagon, and spoke to her father. The girl gave him a volatile glance, then shifted again to her tasks.

Her cold indifference only added to the fury that she and her folks had built up within Jay. He wanted to take her in his big hands and shake some sense and understanding into her stubborn little head. What did she, or any of them, know about the intolerable hostility of Blake Anson and his gun crew? What did it matter to them . . . Tomorrow they would be gone.

He remembered, then, to look for the sun. Already it was a great round, red ball that cast long shadows before the wagons. He could delay no longer . . . had to get away from these people so he could think clearly.

His legs worked like the thrust of mighty pistons beating against the unoffending earth. No man should ever be fenced in like this, cornered both physically and spiritually from all sides. No man should be denied the right to live his own life in his own way. The world was big enough for the millions to whom it gave life, but

not, it seemed, for the littleness of some few. . . . Blake Anson's kind in particular.

In the shade of the big cottonwood tree where he had stacked the few personal belongings that Blake Anson had permitted him to keep, he stopped. His bedroll was there, and a few of his clothes, an ax and his rifle. Not much pay for a life time of work . . .

He lifted the gun in his hands, brushed his fingers down across the worn smoothness of it. Yesterday he hadn't had a chance to use it, but tomorrow it might come in handy for stalking a deer or bringing down a thieving coyote. Those were the things for which a sod-buster used his guns.

Then, quite suddenly, he was aware of the strange hush that had fallen about him. The voices of the children playing in the encampment had ceased, and the babble of grown-up voices was no longer a sound on the lifting breeze.

Jay froze as he stood, actually listening to the ominous silence. But he didn't have to turn to know that it was sundown . . . that Blake Anson and his crew of killers were riding up.

He stood there waiting until he heard the soft pad of the horses' feet, then turned, still grasping his rifle, and looked full into Blake Anson's scowling face.

Anson's riders ranged alongside him, a taut, grim visaged crew. And also within Jay's awareness was silence which lay over the wagon encampment, and which Anson appeared to ignore as of no consequence.

Anson said, "You could have saved yourself, Wilkins."

"I could have," Jay agreed, "but somehow I just never got around to leavin'."

Anson studied him harshly. "It ain't too late yet," he remarked.

And Jay saw that Anson was looking at the gun in his hands. That did something to Jay, snapped the slender cord that had held his decision in abeyance all day. He knew now why he hadn't gone. He hadn't wanted to. And he remembered what Maw Fallon had said about all those unmarked graves along the westward trail . . . and now he couldn't go. Not even if he wanted to.

The soft sound of Jay's rifle falling into cock broke the hush. "This is a big world, Anson . . . big enough for all the folks who want to come into it. You run cattle from here clear into New Mexico, a good two

hundred miles . . . and we're only askin' for a small part of that range.

"You said sundown, Anson. . . ."

Jay waited an instant, his gun held unmoving on Anson's belt buckle. But it wasn't Blake Anson who made the first move. It was one of his hired killers. And Jay saw him too late. The staggering impact of lead reached Jay, jarred his senses, dropped him to one knee.

Now Blake Anson's guns were leaping into action, spitting orange destruction from their snub noses. Jay saw them . . . heard them . . . felt them . . . and knew that he could not last long under such a withering barrage as these men might lay down against him. But he had to stop Blake Anson. Anson was the man who had fomented all this trouble. With him gone the others would scatter like tumbleweeds.

Now the rifle in Jay's big hands jarred . . . once . . . twice . . . and Blake Anson was twisting slowly downward from his saddle, astonishment on his swart face.

Things were blurring before Jay's eyes now. The earth, the blueness that was the sky, the canvas sheeted wagons and the men on horseback became one monstrous, whirling confused mass. Everything was distorted and displaced, and it seemed that a thousand guns were roaring in his ears . . . guns that were meant to tear him to pieces, but that were, somehow, failing.

For a time there was nothing, and then awareness began to flow back into him. Sounds . . . the muffled beat of wind-whipped canvas, the guarded placing of a foot, the hushed murmur of many voices at a great distance. He opened his eyes and saw the dark silhouette of the wagons, the

reddish glow of firelight and the figures of the argonauts moving about him.

It seemed strange that he should still be alive . . . alive and feeling the soft brush of hands across his fevered brow. He rolled his head ever so little and saw Jean Fallon sitting beside him.

"It's all over now," she told him quickly. "Blake Anson and his men won't bother us again."

This seemed incredible. Jay shook himself mentally, and something of his disbelief must have shown in his face, for the girl said, "It was Maw's idea of helping you out. She told Paw that if you stayed to fight we'd all have to help."

Jay's skepticism was still very mobile in his eyes. "You mean that you folks . . . did this . . . for me?"

Jean Fallon answered swiftly. "You got Anson. We got the others . . . and Paw said that any spot of ground that was good enough for a man to die over was good enough for him to settle on for life."

Jay lay very still for a moment, thinking, letting the significance of the moment become a part of him. And from across the fire came old Arch Fallon's voice, saying, "As I was saying before . . . us sod-busters give life to a country."

Jay smiled wanly. "We got off to kind of a bad start, Jean," he whispered, "but I been wonderin' if mebbe . . . some day . . . I could get you to set me a permanent plate at your table . . ."

Jean stroked his head gently, then ran his fingers into his hair and pulled it with fierce gentleness. "We have got an extra," she whispered back. "But you hush now . . ."

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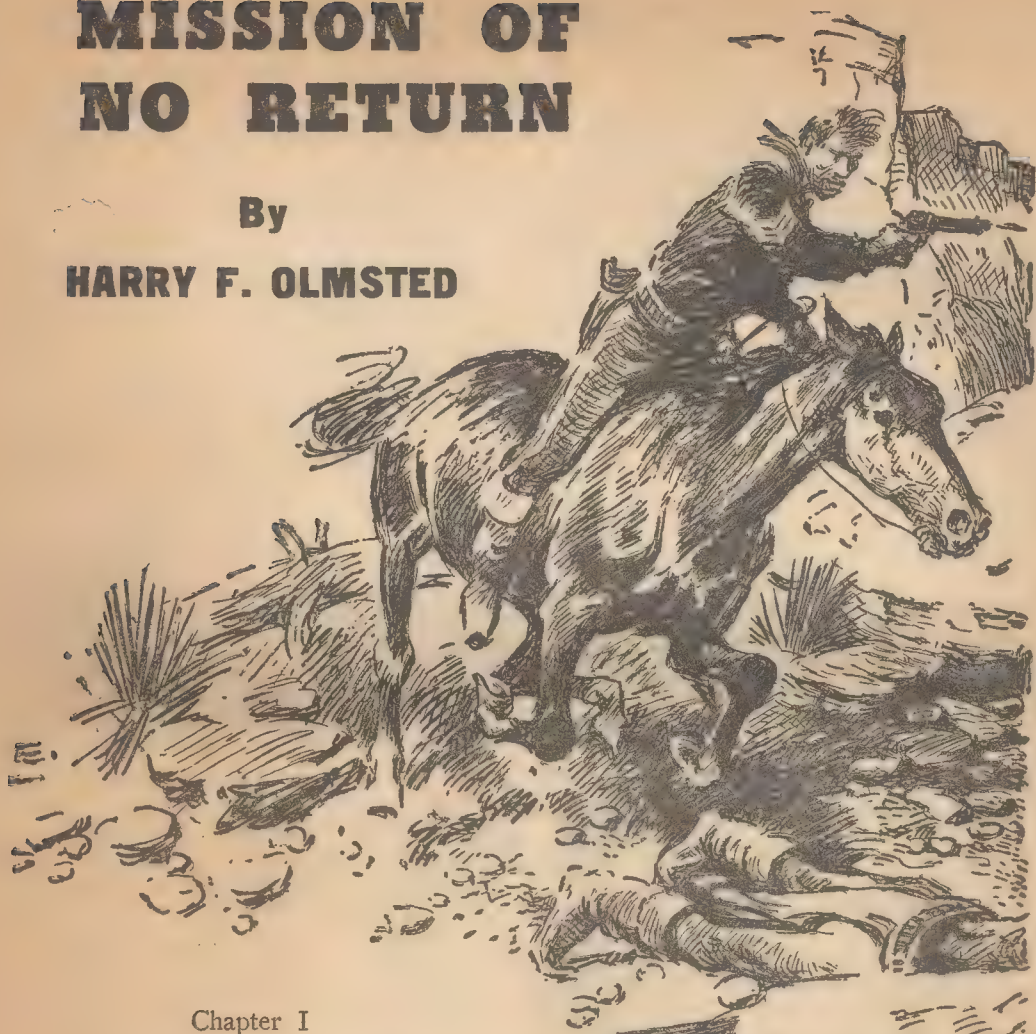
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MUTUAL BROADCASTING SYSTEM, INC.

MISSION OF NO RETURN

By

HARRY F. OLMSTED



Chapter I

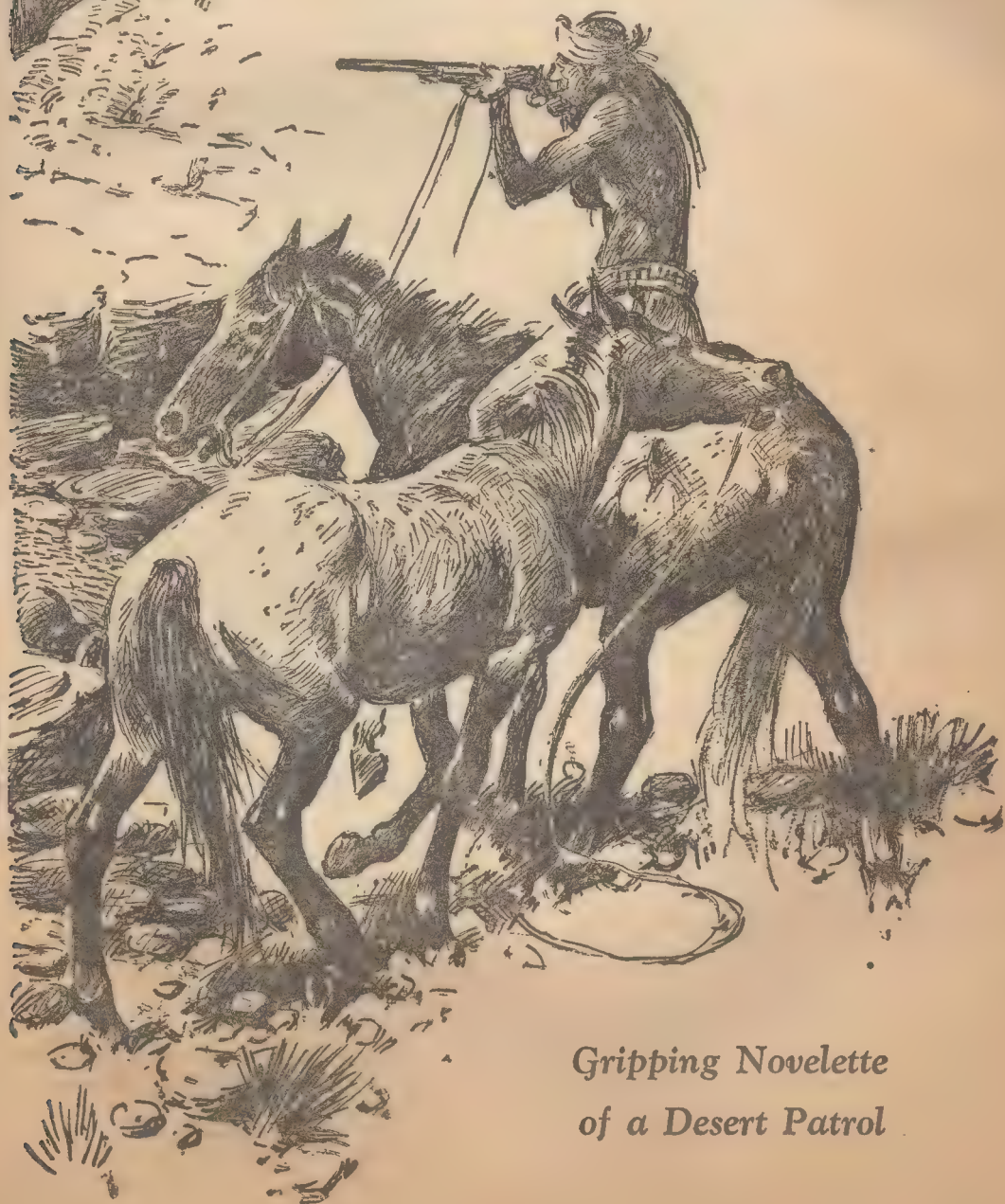
DETAIL FOR THE DAMNED

COMPANIES D and F, 23rd Infantry, were bivouacked on the Salada, where the Matizals nudge the river southward. The sun was down. Wispings of haze softened the canyon, purple veils laced with coiling smoke from the campfires. Camp Apache lay a four-day killing march behind. Rocky cliffs, bombarded by a fierce August sun, paid out heat, doubling the discomfort of weary, sore-footed soldiers.

Sergeant Mark Buckalew lay on the moist sand at the river's edge, too tired to eat. Thoughts, like hungry insects, buzzed through his brain. Aside from the luxury of big water, why had the major chosen to

Sergeant Mark Buckalew raised the Colt and fired desperately.

Into the blistering hell of the parched Matitzal wasteland rode a doomed infantry sergeant with the turncoat scout sworn to kill him—daring both the hate of his guide and the hate of the lurking Tontos to draw them into a bloody guntrap. . . . For to Mark Buckalew, one dead sergeant was better than four hundred U. S. Indian fighters butchered in their life-blood.



*Gripping Novelette
of a Desert Patrol*

camp here? Sentries were pacing the rims, alert to warn the command. But if the hostiles chose to strike, what good would a warning be. This was a trap and the 23rd was a tiny island of defiance in a tossing sea of revolt.

Mark's mind tried to make a pattern of a jigsaw campaign strategy. Northward, Colonel Mason led a 5th Cavalry column out of Camp Hualapai, splitting the restless Verdes and their Tonto allies. Somewhere west, Colonel McGregor hunted Coyoteros with a patrol of the 1st, out of Fort Whipple. Colonel Carr, striking from Camp Verde, was after the Pinalenos. Major Brown's column of the 5th swung up from Fort Grant, herding the weak but troublesome Gileños into the main nutcracker. Captain Burns, with a flying column from McDowell, was skirting the Superstitions to flank a raiding Tonto band while making liason with the 23rd in Salado Canyon.

Every outfit was isolated and on its own. Signal fires blazed from the peaks. The hostiles knew exactly what all units were doing; the commanders didn't. The planned exchange of couriers had failed. Not one dispatch bearer of the 23rd had reported back. Back at Camp Apache was a pitiful token force. The hostiles would know that, too. And if the vacillating White Mountain tribesmen joined the revolt and attacked the post. . . . Mark cursed the army and his folly in joining it. Yet if he hadn't joined, he wouldn't have met Mary.

Mark's mind turned back to when he had been detailed to escort Mary Scanlan, daughter of the chief of scouts at the post, from the ambulance, which had carried her from Bowie, to the quarters of her father, Michael Scanlan. It had been a brief walk across the parade ground. Mark straight and proud and precise beside the pretty girl. From the corner of his eye he caught her appraisal of him, met her snapping black eyes and then the upturn of her stubby Irish nose.

Later, at a company dance, Mary Scanlan had told him, with a bit of a brogue, of her years with an invalid mother, eating out her heart for army life with her frontier-loving sire. She spoke of her mother's dying and then her Irish wit was glossing her grief, and she was laughing with the pure joy of a dream realized. She loved the plains and

the garrison life, and why should she not?

Pretty and vivacious, she won her way into the hearts of lonely soldiers. Soon the men of Company D were slaves at her feet. She danced like a sprite. She flirted scandalously. Her laughter was a ringing bell, flogging those who would turn a moment serious.

But, for Mark, there was no frivolity with Mary. He had never seen her like. For him there could be no other girl and quickly he told her so.

Mary listened to him, her eyes wide and wondering. That pleased Mark and would have sufficed until he could fully break her to his way of thinking. But she listened to others with the same rapt attention. Especially to Hannibal Slack.

Slack was a civilian scout, handsome, picturesque, with sharp aquiline features, magnificent physique and corn-colored hair worn long after the frontier fashion. Never a shy one, he boasted in the barracks that he would wed Mary and take her to his mountain ranch, beyond the Blues. Mark was silently, stubbornly determined that nothing of the sort should happen.

Slack, knowing Apaches even better than Wales Arnold, Clay Beaufort or Corydon Cooley, was favored by his superior—Mike Scanlan—who encouraged his suit. Slack's reputation among the Apaches, earned through a tribal marriage to the daughter of Wa-poo-itah, a Tonto Chief, caused refusal of his services by Colonel Carr. But Major Godey Randall, commanding the 23rd and badly in need of capable scouts, employed him without question. Secretly, Mark admired the man, admitting that his prejudice was purely personal, grounded on jealousy.

THESE WERE Mark's thoughts when the major's orderly roused him. "Major's compliments, Sergeant Buckalew. Report to his tent at once."

He saluted and turned away. Mark got up, vaguely troubled by the summons. There must of necessity be further attempts to get couriers through. Every man in the command feared the detail. Depression stirred Mark as he strode through the camp. Hungrily, he eyed the activity, like a man looking at something for the last time.

Soldiers, gaunt, hollow-eyed, bearded, sat wolfing their evening meal, washing down

food with strong, black coffee. Cooks sweated at their hot kitchens. In a make-shift corral against the cliff, hostlers groomed strapping Missouri mules—darlings of the army since the advent of General Crook. There must be grain for the big brutes if men went hungry. Nobody complained. The packtrain cut odds already long and favoring the Apache.

The major's tent was loosely slung, with flaps back to permit the free flow of air. Major Randall sat at the entrance—a liberal man who scorned review, parade and the drill-book dragoon. Tall, straight, spare and restless, his gray eyes were nervously mercurial. His brown hair was thinning. Under a hawkish nose, his mustache drooped morosely. Quick of decision and brusque of speech, he was never willfully unkind.

"Sergeant!" He returned Mark's salute. "Sit. After saying many complimentary things about you, Scout Slack had suggested you for special duty that may mean the fate of this command."

Startled, Mark flashed a look at the scout, seated across the folding table from major. The man was fully relaxed, slumped in the canvas chair, fingers laced indolently and a taunting grin on his cheeks. There were sly secrets in his dark eyes and the curtain was drawn and Mark read them. The scout, not content to win or lose Mary in fair rivalry, had suggested him for courier detail.

Mark choked back a rush of anger. "Kind of Slack, sir," he muttered, and sat down, letting all his scorn fill his glance at the great flamboyant man in fringed buckskins, turquoise eardrops and necklaces and wrapped Apache moccasins. His get-up, coupled with swarthy skin and high-boned cheeks, made him look Indian. Only his tawny hair belied him.

"Live in the territory, I believe, Sergeant?" asked the major.

"Ten years, sir. On and around the Salado and the Verde."

"Hmmm. Know this canyon?"

"No, sir. Not above Mormon Flats."

"I hoped you did. Speak Apache?"

"A little, sir. I understand the dialect better than I speak it."

The commandant seemed to study a roughly pencilled map and Mark, waiting, turned his eyes to a man who sat within the gloom of the tent, never moving, never

speaking. Like a rattlesnake sunning itself on a rock.

This man was an Apache, from the Mojave tribe on the far Colorado. He was large, darkly handsome. His ebon hair was knotted behind and straggled over his brows, half hiding eyes like twin coals of fire. Esky Zhinnie—Black Boy—was one of Randall's most trusted scouts yet, like others of his kind, he aroused suspicion in Mark.

The major resumed. "Esky Zhinnie's been scouting the canyon. He found no trace of Captain Burns' troop but reports the enemy swarming all the way to the Tonto confluence. Remember Binah Tlitsoi, the White Mountain medicine? Good, I see you do. He's rallying the tribes for an attack in force."

Fear for Mary swept Mark. "White Mountains! Are they out?"

"I know what you're thinking, Sergeant. No, the White Mountains hold firm. Like most prophets, Binah has least honor among his own people. But Tontos, Chiricahuas and Pinals, they're listening to him in some stronghold upriver."

"A cave!" interrupted Slack. "He's got 'em dancing—a bad sign."

"A bad sign," echoed the major. "We've a stiff problem, Sergeant. If we remain here too long, we're bait in a trap. If we march after Binah, they'll fade before us. We must match stealth with stealth. Slack knows the place and has volunteered to lead the way. An army man must arrest Tlitsoi. Slack has suggested you."

Mark nodded, his eyes slitted as he glared at the grinning scout. "I think I understand why, sir."

"His wishing to have you, Sergeant, is good enough for me. This will take teamwork. The result will be most important, and success will justify this campaign. Capture Binah if you can. Kill him if you must. But get him. Surprise will be your ally. It's a dangerous mission. I'll not hold it against you if you refuse. What do you say?"

Mark looked a Slack. The scout was leering at him, challenge in his bold eyes. Daring him. Mark's jaw jutted. "I should like to go, sir."

"Good!" Major Randall rose, offering his hand. "Luck, Sergeant, and God bless you."

The matter settled, Mark walked out, fill-

ing his lungs, struggling against his temper. He heard Slack's slow laugh behind him. "I'll do my best to get him there, Major. It'll be no hayride, believe me. Hope I ain't chose wrong."

And the major's: "Buckalew! One moment!" Mark pivoted and turned back to the table. The officer was not looking at him. His eyes were on Hannibal Slack and there was a new sternness about him. "What do you mean by that, Mister Slack?"

The scout laughed. "Nothing special, Major. You know I ain't got too much confidence in these enlisted men."

"But you spoke highly of Sergeant Buckalew. You suggested him."

"I know, Major, but—"

"What he can't tell you, sir," put in Mark, "is that he suggested my name, hoping to get me out there and lose me among the hostiles."

"That's a lie!" snapped Slack. "He's—"

"Silence, Slack!" Major Randall rose from his chair. "Go on, Sergeant."

"I'm guessing, sir, but—oh, he knows he's got a chance of winning throughout there. He thinks I haven't. If he comes back and I shouldn't, he figures to have easier sailing with the lady we're both interested in."

"I'll take my chances with you, anywhere, any time," growled Slack, darkly.

"A personal difference," mused the major, and he was scowling. "I can't take a chance on it. This is too important. I can send Esky Zhinnie and some other non-commissioned man."

"I hope, sir," said Mark, "that you'll not do that. Slack's a good man. He will not find me such a pilgrim as he thinks. If you can see your way clear to let it ride as planned, sir, I'll not let anything personal interfere."

"The same goes for me, Major," grumbled Slack, but his eyes were cloudy with anger. "I'll give him my hand on it."

Mark took his hand, bracing against the steel grip the scout put against his fingers. For an instant they strained. Slack, failing to make Mark wince, loosed the hold. Major Randall smiled grimly.

"Very well, men. I'm depending on you. Sergeant, you will defer to Mister Slack until you sight your objective. Then he will accept your orders. Before returning, sepa-

rate and try to contact Captain Burns. My compliments, and tell him I'm marching up canyon in the morning. A thousand hostiles lie between us. I'll deploy along the north rim. He must be vigilant to block any enemy movement south. Luck!"

The conference was ended and Mark was seething as he went for his Springfield, a bite of supper, and food for his ration pouch.

Chapter II

MURDER TRAIL

WHILE he made ready, Mark damned his interference that had served no good purpose except to reveal his jealousy and feed his pride. Had he kept his mouth shut, Major Randall would have sent another man with Esky Zhinnie, the Apache Mojave. And yet, thinking more soberly as his temper cooled, he realized the importance of having it this way.

Certainly, Slack would not be affected by any superstitious awe of Binah Tlitsoi, the Medicine Man. The same could not be said of Black Boy, with any assurance. As for Mark, who had a more vital reason for ending a leadership that menaced the territories, pitifully thin-uniformed lines and—more important Camp Apache?

Mark had seen Binah many times, hanging about Camp Apache. Slender, small-boned, dreamy-eyed, Binah understood English but seldom spoke it. It was hard for Mark to imagine this taciturn little man with the knowing, scornful smile as a war lord lashing superstitious followers to destruction. But there could be no doubt that it was true.

The chaplain at Camp Apache had told Mark of his long talks with the soft-spoken, thirty-six-year-old mystic, plumbing his philosophies, reading his character, gauging his menace. The chaplain's judgment was that Binah was sincere, insofar as a twisted brain can be sincere. His hallucinations were real to him. If he lived, many a soldier would die; settlers would be murdered, settlements ravaged and weakly-held military posts reduced. Without him to stimulate tribal fever for war, the Apache would be no such formidable fighting man.

While he packed a ration he might never need, Mark recalled what the chaplain had said of Binah's background. The agent had

chosen him, among others, for schooling at Santa Fe. There he had learned the Resurrection Story, something that was to change the course of his life.

Finishing school, he returned to the White Mountains and was one of those to go to Washington, to lay tribal grievances before President Grant. Failing there to secure any promise of better treatment for the Apache, he returned home to meditate and to plan.

He haunted sacred shrines. He danced and chanted. Prompted by the chaplain, he confessed that once, after dancing himself into a frenzy, he had felt once mighty leaders of his people stir in their graves. A voice spoke to him, telling him that Mangas and Victorio, Cachees, Wapooitah and a long list of forgotten greats could rise again if the Apache tribes rose as a nation and hurled the white man back. It could be done by corn harvest and then the dead could rise to hold the gains.

He was crazy, thought Mark, but the tribesmen believed him sacred. Only his death or capture could prevent the blood bath.

Ready now for the test, Mark hunted up Slack. The scout was ready and waiting, ugly tempered and smarting. He got up, looking Mark up and down, his sneering silence more insulting than anything he might have voiced. Mark called the corporal of the guard who led them through the picket lines, and watched them vanish in the gathering darkness.

Slack took a swinging stride that made Mark hump to keep pace. He had horsebacked from Apache; Mark had marched—no small handicap. Slack seemed to see in the dark. He found fair footing where Mark

stumbled, his boots setting up a clattering. Campfire glow fell behind. Canyon walls reared higher. The gloom deepened and Mark had increasing trouble with his footing, here where ancient floods had dumped debris. Once Slack flung about, snarling a curse.

"Cripes, don't make so much noise. 'Paches are sure to be spyin' on the camp. They got ears like coyotes. Want to fetch 'em down on us? Want their knives diggin' into our ribs?"

It wasn't what he said, but the way he said it. Like an annoyed man scolding a naughty child. Mark burned. "You think I'm trying to draw them?" he demanded. "You knew boots would make noise. If you wanted silence, why didn't you dig me up some moccasins?"

Slack laughed. "I thought of it," he said, "but decided ag'in' it. Like I told the major, I can take care of myself if your clatter fetches 'em down on us."

"And I suppose you think I can't, eh?"

Slack's belly shook with silent laughter. "You're a smart boy," he sneered. "You guessed why I suggested you for this hayride, an' you played right into my hands when you talked the major into sendin' us. One of us ain't comin' back, you hear me."

"Maybe neither of us," said Mark, calmly,

"I'm comin' back," boasted the scout. "Mary's got a sneakin' suspicion that you're the best man. I'll have the pleasure of seein' her shed a tear for you. Then I'll have the chaplain splice us, quit the army an' take her over to my ranch in the Blues."

"Interesting," said Mark, grimly. "If you were right up to that point, there you go wrong. Burying that girl, where she'll be

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without neighbors, friends, fun, would kill her. She won't stand it. She'll leave you."

"I'll soon knock such ideas out of her head, Buckalew. Never was a woman that wasn't better off fer a good hidin' now an' again. Yep, I'll beat all that butterfly foolishness out of her, saddle-break her to look after a husband an' children, keep a cabin an' make a hand with the cattle."

Something coiled in Mark's stomach. "You'd actually beat a girl like Mary?"

"Beat her?" Slack laughed. "I'll skin her alive till she's broke an' eddicated. Once a week ain't too often, for at least a year or—"

He was close to Mark. His gaunt, stubbled face was thrust into Mark's. Mark had no conscious impulse to strike until his fist smashed into the scout's leering face and shock of the blow ran startlingly into Mark's shoulder. Rocked onto his heels, Slack stumbled backward three steps and fell across a half-buried log into a tangled pile of drift. Half stunned, he lay there, his hand over a nose already streaming blood. It looked like he'd stay down until Mark rapped:

"Skin her alive, eh? Break her? Educate her? Try it on me, you snake."

Down came Slack's hand. He stared at Mark, standing in the starlight, like a man freshly awakened. Mumbling a choked curse, he heaved up, lurching toward Mark with great fists balled. Mark laid his rifle against a rock and braced to meet him.

SLACK seemed to float in, so silent were his moccasins. He swung, full arm, and Mark took the blows on the arms and stepped away. The scout followed in, his attempt to fasten Mark a failure as the sergeant ducked, pivoted and beat him off balance with pistoning jabs.

They were nearly the same size, the scout running more to sinew and bone. But he was fresh and ruthless and Mark had no illusions of besting him in a rough and tumble. Slack halted, stood flat footed, glaring. Then tore in with a flurry of wild wheeling blows. Mark fell away from them and as Slack followed in, unleashed his own attack, clubbing his right and left to the chin. The scout sat down with a grunt.

He was up at once, his puzzlement as to how to fight this foe an agony on his gaunt face. With a curse, he leaped in, swinging.

Mark met him with vicious smashes, took a wicked blow alongside the head that filled his brain with fire. He sank to one knee, caught Slack's ankle as he launched a kick, and flipped him onto his back.

They came up together, both breathing hard. Slack's face was a smear of blood. Again he tried to wrap his thick arms about Mark, failed and kept after him, his knuckles hard drawn. They sparred carefully, then crashed together, swapping blow for blow. Mark took a jarring blow to the ear and wrung a gasp from the scout with a clean shot to the belly. Slack doubled and Mark hit him with a roundhouse swing to the chin. Again the scout was down.

"Get up!" wheezed Mark. "What's the matter? Can't you fight?"

The man, stung, heaved erect and hurtled at Mark, who hammered his bleeding nose and pounded his ribs. Mark's boots were getting lead-heavy and they dragged against him as he backpedaled. Desperation drove Slack against him and he got the hold that had defied him, trying to wrestle Mark down. But the strength was not in him now and Mark broke the hold, his right striking like a cannonball into the man's middle.

Slack's legs buckled. His face was streaming blood and his breath was bubbly in his throat. His arms, heavy with fatigue, hung down and Mark moved around him, measuring for the kill. Slack tried to sway away from that looping right, failed. It caromed off his square chin like a bludgeon. Slack reeled dizzily. His head tipped down and he fell forward, full length.

"That—that's for Mary," gasped Mark, and sat down beside him, heaving for breath. Slack slept unmoving and presently Mark was breathing easier, his temper cooling to the point where he could feel regret. He had started the brawl, after promising the major he would work with Slack as a team. Slack would return to the camp and report. That would mean court martial, disgrace, maybe worse, unless—

Mark, spent, tormented in his mind, sat there weighing the alternatives. He had only the sketchiest idea where the cave-like Apach stronghold was located, and less idea still how to get there. The canyon of the Salado was the Apache thoroughfare. If he followed it. . . .

On impulse, he removed his boots, stripped off Slack's moccasins and put them

on, wrapping them about his ankles and securely tying them. It was less than two miles back to camp. If the scout couldn't wear the boots it wouldn't hurt him too much to return in bare feet.

Without another look at Slack, Mark moved up the canyon, silent now, no longer stumbling. The wall pinched him down to the river bank. He took to the water, found it hip deep at the middle and dangerously swift. Several times he was in danger of having his feet swept out from under him on the shifting, sandy bottom. But he braced against it and made the south bank, where he found a well-beaten trail.

The way led upward to a bench under the rimrock. Here the voice of the river was muted and Mark breathed easier, trusting his ears to warn him of the approach of hostiles. But it was only a respite. After a mile, the trail dipped down to the river's edge and the fear of running squarely into the enemy was on him again.

He had covered another half mile when the shrill whinny of a horse behind him sent him darting into the willows that bordered the trail. He held his breath and waited and presently they filed past him—a half score of riders, so close he could smell the smoky reek of them.

He heard a guttural voice. A short laugh. Hoofs clicked against the rocks and then they had passed and he could breathe again.

Mark hunkered there, trembling a little, dwelling upon how easily they could have overhauled him had not that horse whinnied, how little chance he would have had. It made the trail ahead seem deadly, his mission hopeless. But he thought of what lay behind and stubborn determination gripped him. He stepped again into the trail and immediately withdrew. Something down trail had whisked against a willow frond with a faint whistling sound.

The lone, gliding figure was almost within arm's length when Mark recognized Hannibal Slack's tall figure. His heart leaped. A frightened loneliness, born of the vastness of the night threat, urged him to call out. But memory of the recent unpleasantness and his theft of the scout's moccasins held him mute.

Then Slack was gone and it was too late. Grudging admiration for the man ran through him. Slack had not turned back to report. He had resumed his interrupted

mission, alone. And those were moccasins, not boots, on his feet.

Mark was digesting this when he sensed the approach of another form down the trail. It was a Tonto, naked save for headband and clout, his skin dark. He moved swiftly, his ebon hair straggling out behind him. He was stopped and he carried his left hand against his chest, low down, as if to hold in the blood that gushed over his fingers. His face was contorted, his breath rasping from his lungs as he strained forward.

In his right hand he carried a knife that flung back the starlight glitteringly. His feet were bare and now Mark knew where Slack had picked up those moccasins. He had intercepted this hostile and struck him down with cold steel. But he had not struck hard enough and he was now in deadly peril.

The warrior heaved past and Mark stepped into the trail behind him. "*Chindi!*" he husked, flinging the epithet hated by any night-bound Apache. The Tonto halted and is if spring propelled, whirled and flung himself at Mark. Mark's swinging Springfield struck him, stock against skull. Smash of crushing bone. The hostile uttered no cry as he fell to the trail, quivered and lay still. Mark was ruefully examining the shattered ash of his gunstock when a voice spoke coldly from a rod away.

"Not so bad, Sergeant. You saved me the trouble. Knowed that 'Pache was on my tail an' was set to take care of him." Hannibal Slack came gliding up and Mark braced himself. The scout, noticing, laughed softly, brushed a hand lightly across his puffed face.

"Don't worry, fella. I've had enough of you for one night. An' stealin' my moccasins, you stole trash. I took a better pair offa this monkey, a lot easier than trackin' you down an' tryin' to get mine back. For a damned soldier, you ain't doin' so bad. Notice anything about them 'Paches that just rode past?"

"One rode a shod horse," said Mark.

"Hmmm. You're wastin' time as a sergeant of infantry, fella. Them horseshoes mean anything to yuh?"

"Only one horse shy at the camp, I reckon."

"That's to be expected, Buckalew. What it means to me ain't expected. Well—" he turned, laughed softly. "I got a job to do.

See you later— That is—if you make it.”

He moved away, halting as Mark said: “I’ll take it kindly, Slack, if you’ll give me directions to that stronghold.”

A touch of anger tightened the scout’s voice. “Directions? Sure. Foller your nose. Find it the hard way like I done.” Then he was gone, leaving Mark with a sinking in his stomach, a depressing sense of Slack’s ruthless enmity.

Chapter III

VALLEY OF SUDDEN DEATH

THERE was nothing now for Mark to do but go on. It was a matter of pride with him. Even though he was free to return to the camp, he could not contemplate the shame of reporting failure. And even though he might be too late, behind Slack, it was unthinkable that he should willfully provide fuel for the scout’s gloating.

Leaving the ruined rifle behind, he stepped out carefully, straining his ears for sounds from ahead. Slack might be jumped by skulking hostiles. Any Tontos behind would be sure to delay upon finding that body in the trail. Yet the first warning to come to him was from down canyon. He found cover just in time to evade a half-dozen tribesmen who rode low, scourging their mounts, plainly on the hunt for some enemy haunting the trail.

They passed and Mark shoved out into their dust, speeding his pace as he figured his best chance of safety lay close behind this flying hostile patrol. He was still conscious of the dust taint when he had covered a mile. Then he lost it and moved ahead more slowly, carefully.

He had traveled another mile when some subtle warning brought him up short. For a moment he stood there, every sense alert. Then he heard his name spoken. “Buckalew?”

“Slack!”

The scout faded toward him, a shadow blending perfectly into the night. He carried something that swung in his hand, like a bucket. As he paused before Mark, his face twisted in a wicked grin, he held the object up before the sergeant’s eyes. “Ever seen this fellow before, Buckalew?”

Horror tightened Mark’s muscles. He looked into a human face—dead but weirdly

alive. Black eyes wide open. Thin lips down curved in a snarl of hatred. Coarse black hair twisted into Slack’s fingers. Blood still dripping, where it had been hacked from the body. Mark knew that face. “Black Boy!” he gasped. “Esky Zhinnie!”

“Right,” laughed Slack. “Our trusted Apache-Mojave captain of scouts. I’m takin’ it back to the major, otherwise he’d never mistrust them snakes. This was Esky’s chance to sell us out an’ he knew I knowed it. These ‘Paches on the trail—they should be listenin’ to Binah except for Esky puttin’ ‘em after us.”

He looked up at the cliffs, as if spotting landmarks, then desposited the head in the crotch of a cottonwood. “I’ll cache it here,” he husked. “If it’s here when you come back, take it in with you.”

He didn’t return to the trail. Mark heard him thrashing the brush. “Slack,” he called. “Wait!”

A soft laugh floated back. “Can’t, Sergeant. They’re gettin’ on with that Devil Dance!”

He heard the man splashing across the river, then there was silence. Never had Mark felt so utterly abandoned. In the circumstances, he could do no less than follow, hoping to keep close enough to the scout to pick up the location of the cave. But when he dragged himself out of the river, his clothes streaming water, Slack had vanished utterly.

Mark kept on, following no trail now as he clambered over river boulders, and came presently to a grove of cottonwoods. There were sounds among the trees and he remained frozen until he determined that the mott was full of horses—Tonto ponies tethered to the trees. Mark was not challenged and he was tempted, considering the matter or riding the rest of the way. This thought he rejected. If the horses were tied here, he must be close to the cave. Very close.

Moving carefully, keeping well back from the river, Mark continued on, rounding a point. Then he heard it—a thin, wire-drawn falsetto reverberating like ghost whisperings against the canyon walls. He could not have told whence it came except for the faint, flickering glow beyond a ridge that, pointing south, formed a gooseneck bend in the canyon.

Hugging the brush line, Mark carefully rounded this point and climbed to a narrow bench overlooking the river. Here, where the rimrock indented a full hundred yards, he looked upon a giant stage, with a backdrop of grandeur, fuming footlight fires and a large cast of players sent directly from the Inferno.

Behind, like the shell of a bandstand, rose the roof of the eroded cave, great spillings from above forming an impregnable breastwork. These rocks swarmed with armed Tontos, bronze statues watching the light of leaping fires play off the painted bodies of stamping, shrilling chanters on the leveled dancing ground below.

Like demons from hell, the chanters wailed their exhortations—words, refrain and rhythm ancient when Columbus touched the new world. Leading them, weirdly painted and bedecked, was Binah Tlitsoi. He wore a crown, a great "W" towering above him, that jerked and spun as he danced.

Smallest of them all, this magic maker with the yellow eyes. Yet, like a sidewinder among diamondbacks, the deadliest. A sacred healer, invoking resurrection of dead warriors to restore Apache glory, tarnished now and weakening.

Mark left that rhythm smash against him, run wildly along his nerves. He trembled in the lash of it, but he was cool, clear-headed, his earlier fears gone now that his test was at hand. He gauged the range, indulging momentary regret that he had ruined his Springfield. It was two hundred and fifty feet, he decided, an easy shot with a rifle, something far more difficult with an arm.

He drew his Colt, looked to the loads and set himself, slowly bringing his sights against that restless target with the swaying crown. A savage gust of wind whipped across the ridge, stirring the brush and bending the flames of those dancing fires. Mark lowered his piece, relaxing his nerves, waiting for the air to still again so he could draw another bead.

The wind calmed and Mark again lifted his revolver, aiming with the utmost care. After the shot, death would be all about him. He might not get a second shot; he must make the first one good. His finger tightened on the trigger and strain drew his cheek muscles taut.

IT HAPPENED then, before he could drop the hammer of his piece. Binah Tlitsoi leaped into the air, threshing and twisting like a snake, came down lurching into his chanters, and fell to the ground, dragging three of them with him. His shrill whoop shuddered through the night and, blending with the echoes, the sharp, snarling crack of a Springfield.

Shocked with surprise, numbed in body and mind, Mark stood there with his gun hanging, watching the grisly scene. He could see the flashes of Hannibal Slack's rifle winking in the darkness, yonder across a couple of small gulches. He saw chanters clawing their way up the rocks to the cave, some sinking in their tracks, some tumbling down with wild screeches. He saw the attendant warriors vanish from their vantage points as they hurled themselves behind the parapet.

Then, with the stage deserted save for that handful of dead and dying, Mark saw the scout appear atop a small hogback as he raced toward the river. He saw the muzzle bursts of rifles from behind the parapet, heard the whine of ricocheting bullets and Slack's wild yell of defiance.

The Tontos, recovering from their first panic and certain now this was no attack in force, were swarming over the parapet, racing after Slack.

Mark spoke them back with six swift shots, scattering them, turning them to cover. Then he spun and hurled himself back to river level, hoping to intercept the fleeing scout. He came down the slant in a shower of rocks and dust, picked himself up and paused to reload and to listen.

The Tontos were silent. Over the muttering of the stream, Mark could hear Slack smash through brush and plow into the canyon, falling heavily. He called: "Hurry, Slack! For God's sake, shake it up!"

The scout didn't answer. Mark heard stones rattling as he struggled to his feet, then water splash as he blundered into the river. But it was the shuddery moan that told Mark the truth. Slack had hurt himself, maybe in that fall. He needed help.

Mark holstered his reloaded gun and sprinted. He came upon Slack reeling along the river margin, arms hanging, knees sprung, chin on his chest. "What is it, Slack?" Mark's arms went about him. "What's wrong with you?"

The man turned dazed eyes up at him, never answering. But Mark had his answer all right. His hand, where is supported Slack's back was wet and warm and sticky. Slack was shot through and only his great physical strength was holding him up.

Dismayed, faced by an almost inhuman task, Mark got the man's arm over his shoulder and put all he had into a stumbling run along the bank. If he could only make those Tonto ponies and get Slack aboard one.

After a few seconds, he knew that wasn't to be. Slack's feet dragged and his weight was a burden that slowed Mark to a walk, where nothing short of a swift run could save them, if that. He halted, laid the scout down, figuring to get him onto his shoulder. He tried and he failed. Weariness was having too stern a way with him now. His legs caved in and he dropped Slack, tumbling down beside him. And there he heard the man's muttering.

"Don't fool with me, Sergeant. I—I'm finished. Busted back—and—front. Find Cap'n—Burns. Tell him—Binah dead. Take care—Mary. I—she—she give me the—mitten—before we left. Got—better man." His fingers clutched Mark's tunic, clinging as if to hold himself in this world. "Don't tell her—I—I—agh-h-h."

Hannibal Slack would never complete his request. Mark felt carefully of the scout's chest. There was no heart beat. He could hear the swift approach of the questing Tontos and yet he took time to drag Slack to the river and give his body to the current. Better that than to allow the vengeful hostiles to find it. Then he was speeding along the river bank, his pistol in his hand. The job was only half done.

What Slack had told him about Mary made him hungry to return to her, lent new strength to his muscles. As he ran, he shucked his bandolier of rifle cartridges, his ration bag and hat, hurling them into the river, lessening the advantage of those dark shapes hurtling behind him.

He rounded the point, sprinting into the grove of cottonwoods that held the Tonto ponies. He knew he could not put a pony up the scarp across the river, where the command of Captain Burns was supposed to deploy. At best, he could gain a small but precious lead, quit the horse and make his way up the cliffs afoot.

His pace undiminished, Mark charged in among the ponies that shied, snorted and reared away from the alien smell of him. As he untied one of the fractious animals, he remembered something he had heard about an Indian mounting on the off side. It was true of Plains Indians and he was wondering if it applied to Apaches as he went up the rope, hand over hand. He laid a hand on the neck of the struggling beast, spoke soothingly and sprang upon its back.

The pony broke into straight, crowhopping bucks and took a run through the trees. Mark was fighting to turn down canyon as the animal flashed to the river bank. And there, before him, were two Apache horsemen, just coming in from down the river.

Mark heard the guttural challenge, whirlwind thoughts sweeping his brain. This was his only chance, to gain a lead on the pursuers that were already debouching down on the grove. Was that chance to be blighted? Was his message to Captain Burns to go undelivered, his hopes for Mary to be unrealized, his life snuffed out like a lamp flame?

With the horse trembling between his legs, Mark heard the ripping challenge of the two Tontos. And he heard the tribesmen legging it along the river bank shrilled the command to kill. White-lipped with a terrible urgency, Mark leveled his revolver, loosed a yell and rode straight at that pair. He saw trade Remingtons flash to their shoulders and crimson streaks of muzzle flame lash at him. He felt the tug of a bullet along his side and then he was jerking the trigger of his Colt.

One of the hostiles screamed and slipped limply from his animal. Mark rode over him, firing steadily. Like a figment of nightmare, the second Tonto went down. He was so close he could see the face, terribly contorted in death, and the bullet hole in the forehead.

His pony, crazed with fright, rushed madly along the river bank. Mark's nerves, tingling now with relief, were rock-steady as he wrapped his legs about the little pony's barrel and reloaded. Then he hung low, thankful that he had learned to ride before becoming an infantryman, keeping a sharp watch behind.

Where the river threatened to press him into the north cliff, he put the pony into the water, sent it floundering across in a shower

of spray. On the south bank, he caught the trail and pounded along it, his eyes upturned for the first favorable rift that would permit him to top out. And then, with no hint of warning, he was in the middle of a hostile cavalcade riding leisurely up canyon.

Chapter IV

BACKSHOOT CANYON

ALL was instant chaos. Mark's mount banged into another, knocking it down. His pony went to its knees and he jerked it up. For a split second the scene was static, the hostiles as stunned with surprise as was he. Now fierce sound bombarded Mark and gun thunder rolled explosively. Mark's mount lunged and reared and, coughing, went limp into the trail.

Mark, thrown hard, hurtled into the melee of plunging ponies, arms and legs pinwheeling. Striking the rocky trail, he rolled, half came up, was trampled down by pistoning hoofs, rolled free and wormed his way into the brush. Blind to all but his desperate need, he floundered through thorny thickets, broke onto barren ground at the foot of the talus and started to climb, not daring to question if there was a way out.

Rising to the level of the tree tops, he paused to catch his ragged breath and to glance back. He could see nothing but the tossing tops. He could hear nothing now but the sullen roar of the river. He looked up at the frowning rim above him, drew a long breath and hurled his effort against the rugged slide.

He climbed to where he could see the river, stepped on a loose stone and sent it rolling. Its sound loosed a chorus of Tonto yells and the rolling tattoo of Remington fire. Bullets splattered the rocks about him. He caught at a sagging branch and was pulling himself upward when something struck him, well back. Weakness, without a sense of pain, seized him.

He lost the hold, fell back. He lay on those hard rocks, his brain striving vainly to push back the darkness. From the river rose the savage yells of the hostiles. . . .

How long he lay there, Mark never knew. It seemed a long time; it may have been but a few minutes. He lay still, flogging his fevered brain to action. He could hear the river, the voices of the Apaches and the roll

of rocks under their feet. He could hear the sounds of voices, too—his mother's soft tones, and his father's deep rumble, and strangely—the tinkling of the family music box.

He tried to move, failed. He gulped down air and was stabbed by pain in his back. His brain burned as if all the fires of hell were blazing away there. His blood pounded hotly through his body. His eyes were seared with pain.

He lifted them to the stars and there he saw a strange and shimmering image—Mary. Dressed as he had seen her at the company dance—black, lace-trimmed dress, shiny pumps, a red ribbon in her ebon hair. He shook his head, but the raging fire would not go. She floated down to the rocks before him. Light danced in her powdery eyes. Rouged lips parted in a smile of pearly teeth—her skin deep ivory—her body round and full.

He twisted his gaze from her, and the effort sent pain lancing through his eyeballs, his neck, his back. And when he looked again she was still there, as real as anything else in his fevered brain.

She moved away from him, turning back, beckoning him. Watching the strong swing of her shoulder, seeing the soft turn of her bosom, Mark felt a pang that she should be leaving him, that he might lose her. He cried: "Mary! Wait!"

She smiled and nodded but kept on and Mark was astonished at the ease with which he rose, without pain, almost without effort. How strong she was, how agile, as she climbed over the rocks. Strive as he might, he couldn't narrow the gap between them.

She led him to the narrow shelf at the foot of the straight cliff, and along it toward the west. And as he followed, calling to her, something annoyed him, as flies or mosquitos annoy a man. Something hummed about his ears. Something kept kicking rock dust off the cliff face, dust that stung his face.

Somewhere there was a disturbing noise, like the far smash of thunder. He struck at something that buzzed past his face, missed, turned to look for it. He saw those dark shapes leaping up the talus, saw the flash of a gun and heard the echo of the shot. And then he remembered. Tontos!

He wheeled about and ran. "You shouldn't have come here," he shouted at

Mary. "This is Apache country here."

She was standing now, smiling in an untroubled way as she watched him struggle toward her. She stood at a rift in the cliff face and she was pointing into it, nodding. The bullets were coming faster now and, desperately afraid for her, he turned, sending bullets back at the hostiles. One stumbled and sank down like a man full of weariness. The rest dove to the shelter of rocks.

Mary was not there when he turned and he ran to where he had seen her last, peering vainly into the gloomy slot. He remembered her pointing up the fault and suddenly he felt the astonishment that comes to the sleepwalker when he awakens. He felt lost and he felt pain. He was gasping for breath and his legs were rubbery.

Those imps were coming after him again and he knelt down to shoot at them. He spent six shots, reloaded and spent six more. It didn't seem like he hit anything and they were fanned across the talus now, moving upward in short, dodging runs. And now there were but three more shells for the revolver. Mark heaved up his stomach and the pain in his back tore at his consciousness.

Calling upon his deepest reservoirs of strength, he turned and drew back into the fault. There were no bullets now, but the place was crammed with fallen rocks and it meant crawling over or sliding under. He doubted now that he had seen Mary, but he couldn't be sure and he kept looking up. The Tontos were coming up after him and again bullets were wailing past.

Mark sent two shots down at them and continued his bitter climb.

HE WAS too shaky to rise now and contented himself with pulling himself upward with his arms. It was slow, terribly slow. The hostiles could easily have overtaken him except they were fearful of the gun. A pale glow seeped down into the slot and he saw the whipping branches of a tree up there on top.

Mark topped out with bullets droning past him and collapsed on the mesa floor, barely more than half conscious. He saw the two crouched shapes running toward him through the dawn-lit junipers. He heard the shout: "There's one of 'em now."

He saw one raise a rifle to his shoulder, tried to cry out but succeeded in uttering only a croak.

The second man struck the gun down. "That's no 'Pache, you fool. He's wearin' blue."

Mark heard the far, thin note of a trumpet, saw the bobbing heads of galloping troopers flash across the low tree tops. Mark's laugh was wrung from his soul and he laid his head on his arm. He managed to lift it as the first skirmisher came running up. "Sergeant Buckalew," he croaked. "Company D, 23rd Infantry. Message for Captain Burns."

"This is Captain Burns' patrol," said one, kneeling beside him. "What's the word, soldier?"

"Major Randall's moving up the Salado. The Tontos are leaderless. You're to hold them off the south rim." Mark felt himself slipping and the hallucination was on him again. "Look—look after Mary, will you?"

He flattened out with a sigh and the man was examining his wound.

"Courier from Major Randall, sir. Says the Apaches are leaderless, the 23rd's advancing up the canyon. We're to hold the hostiles off this rim. He's hard hit, sir, needing attention. Shall I get him to the surgeon? He seems delirious. Told us to take care of Mary."

"Hm." Someone knelt beside Mark and a face swam before his vision—a bearded, sober face. A hand was on Mark's shoulder and Captain Burns was saying: "You killed Binah, Sergeant?"

"No, sir. Scout Hannibal Slack did."

"And Slack?"

"He gave his life, sir. He's one of the 23rd's fallen heroes now."

"Uh-huh. What about this girl, Mary?"

Mark stared at him. I—I'm not sure, sir. I— His head dropped and his senses faded out.

The captain stood, very grim. "Looks like we might owe a debt of gratitude to Mary, whoever she is. Even though his mind is plainly feverish and wandering. Get him back to the surgeon, boys. Too many horses are dying."

He turned toward the rim. A heady wind, blue with the smoke of many rifles, flowed across the mesa as the limb of the sun lifted in the east.



"The house is surrounded, Deefy!" the card player said softly. "Look behind you."

BRING HIM BACK DEAD!

Behind him lay the hell-baked soil where a dozen marshals prowled the mesquite to bring him in—alive. . . . And ahead lay the hide-out hills of the gang who'd gunned down his brother, framed him for murder, and who were waiting now to bring him in—dead! . . .

L ANDRY CLAY, cowman from Paw-hunty, stopped his dun pony before a deeply planted sycamore sign post. The road he was following split here. One trail led to the south, a desert land, gray with sage and soapweed, naked hard and spined with cactus. The other, a dimming line of wagon ruts, angled north and west

toward the foothills of the Little Midas country, blanketed in pine and spruce.

With the noon sun like hot metal on his shoulders, he read the words on the crudely carved wooden finger that pointed down his backtrail, "500 Miles to Ft. Smith." Some one had added, "And Hell!"

"You must have been there, brother!"

By **RULAND WALTNER**

Clay muttered. "All the United States marshals in the Territory can't take me back!"

He pulled his Stetson over his eyes and set his pony's head toward the hills. Somewhere in their veiled depths, riding the pleasant thick-grassed valleys of Arkansas Deefy's Circle Ten horse ranch, was Deefy's foreman, Cherokee. At the trial in Ft. Smith, the big halfbreed had lied flatly, stolidly, convincingly; and Clay had been sentenced to hang. That was another score for him to settle; but it must wait on the one that had brought him to the Little Midas country.

Somewhere in those rugged hills was the hideout of the Owl Hoot Gang that burned and robbed and killed its way over four states, unmolested. It had left Clay's brother dying on the floor of his looted bank, but not before Randall Clay wounded the red-head who shot him. The man's companions had carried him to his horse, his dangling left leg leaving a short, bright trail of blood that puddled out in a crimson pool under the hitchrack.

Hard-riding and straight-shooting, the outlaws passed death sentence on any one who followed them. The disappearance of two United States marshals who had traced them to the Little Midas country had made Clay want to explore it as a possible gang refuge. Now he, too, was a fugitive from the law; but even that could not prevent his finding his brother's killers.

"From now on, Fireball, I'm after Rand's murderers, first and last," he said to the dun pony. "And I'm keeping out of other folks' troubles along the way."

He was remembering a day six weeks before when he had stopped for supplies in the general store at the town of Little Midas. The place had been deserted, except for the storekeeper and a young farmer with broad, stooped shoulders and a tired face.

Clay was turning from the counter when two cowboys came in, a blond with lined forehead and slitted eyes and the giant halfbreed, Cherokee, with flat lips and flatter eyes under the mop of his lank black hair. They both walked light on the balls of their feet, their breath sucked in, their hands hanging loose and dangerous beside their guns.

"I don't want no trouble here," the store-

keeper quavered, his eyes on those dangling hands.

"Then keep clear of this clodhopper," Cherokee said, his voice heavy with insolence. "We don't aim to hurt you; but if you get in the way—"

The storekeeper dived under his battered counter and stayed there.

Clay watched the farmer. His brown face was drawn and still, his gray eyes pale in the dark leather of his skin. He was unarmed, but he did not give ground before the swaggering gun fighters.

"We told you to move on a week ago," Cherokee said. "We don't waste our breath."

"It's my land under the Homestead Act," the farmer said in a low, stubborn voice. "It's my crop by the grace of God and the sweat of my brow!"

"It's Arkansas Deefy's range as long as we ride for him," the blond cowboy interrupted. "The Circle Ten means no settlers inside the ten-mile circle of his hoss ranch. We talked reasonable 'cause Deefy ain't wanted to hurt your purty wife. But talking's done. You got to go."

"It's our home," said the farmer. "We're staying."

An unearthly sound cut short his words. Clay had heard it before, back on the Indian reservation—the Cherokee gobble. It was a merging of the coyote howl with the gobble of the wild turkey cock; and it meant that death was breathing down the neck of the man it called.

He saw the farmer stiffen, his fists knuckled white against the counter, his tired face full of awareness of his danger. He saw the halfbreed snake out his gun and the hands of the cowboy jumped toward his holsters. The farmer was no coward, and because of that he was about to be murdered in cold blood.

Clay's response was purely reflex. His own hand filled and the bark of his gun sounded a split second before Cherokee's. His shot tore the Indian's gun from his grasp, its barrel still smoking as it hurtled across the room. The halfbreed clutched his numbed arm and the gobbling sound swelled louder in his jerking throat.

But the other cowboy's hands, too, were full; his guns blazing. Clay felt the sear of a bullet along his arm. The hammer of his gun fanned in staccato rhythm. The cow-

boy caught at his chest. His knees buckled. His slitted eyes opened wide in terror-filled surprise. He pitched forward on his face and a little stream of red began crawling over the uneven flooring, pooling up in the hollows and disappearing in the cracks.

CLAY HOLSTERED his gun and silence crowded the room more painfully than the crash of guns had done. Over the body of the dead cowboy, his eyes met Cherokee's. The halfbreed did not reach for his shoulder holster. He did not glance at his shattered weapon on the floor. He stared at Clay, his eyes flaming redly, the cords in his thick neck ridging as he gobbled a deadly threat. He seemed to have forgotten the farmer, standing dazed against the counter. Swinging on his heel, he marched from the store, leaving the dead man face down in his blood.

The farmer said slowly, "I don't know how else to say it but just—thank you."

"Don't thank me," said Clay. "I'm a cowman. If you were on my range, I'd want you to get out, too. But you had no gun. I don't kill unarmed men."

The farmer drew himself up with grave dignity.

"That was lucky for me," he said. "But I won't leave my farm. I've followed the law, which is more than some other folks do. There's room in the West for us all to live in peace and plenty if some wouldn't try to hog the whole of it."

On hands and knees, the storekeeper crawled around his counter; but, when he saw the dead man, he clambered hastily to his feet.

"Like as not the Regulators'll burn me out for this!" he cried shrilly. "You keep away from my store, Driscoll. You, too, stranger! And all other trouble makers!"

Driscoll, the farmer, shrugged. He seemed filled with the bitter knowledge that he was outcast from the world in which he lived; but that knowledge did not shake his spirit.

"It's not my kind you need to get rid of," he said somberly. "And what happens to me won't tell the tale. I may get killed tomorrow or my farm grabbed off me. But there'll be others to fill my place. The big ranches did a fine job in their day, but their day is ending. It's the little fellows like me, with homes and wives and children,

you'll make money off of—or won't make any."

The storekeeper gnawed uncertainly on his scraggly beard, but spurred heels thudded on the board walk outside, and his resolution stiffened.

"Get out and stay out," he ordered, trying to make his voice carry beyond the open door. "The ranchers are my friends. The ranchers—"

"Hold it, Ned!"

A man strode into the store, big and bronzed and hearty. Half of Little Midas trailed him, eager to know what was going on but content to let him shoulder into trouble first.

"I heard gunplay!"

Pat Masters' eyes, that looked so lazy, travelled from the storekeeper and Driscoll to the dead man and rested on Clay.

"Your work?" he demanded.

"My work," Clay agreed.

"He was hunting trouble," the storekeeper sputtered. "Butted into other folks' business! Squint and Cherokee was having a little argument with Driscoll."

Pat Masters swung toward the farmer.

"You pack a gun?" he asked mildly.

"No." Driscoll answered. "If it hadn't been for this stranger, I'd been killed."

Masters studied the dead man.

"Squint had both guns out," he said.

"And Cherokee's Old Betsy's in the corner, plumb ruined. Might be they was hunting trouble, too."

He turned back to Clay, his eyes alert and probing.

"Those boys are right handy with their artillery, stranger, so you're no slouch. Want to tell me what happened while we work over that hole in your arm?"

Clay had not seen him glance at his injured arm. Yet he was the only person in the room to notice that he had been wounded. Clay liked the man, his big, easy-going body, his soft, unhurried speech, the way he absorbed details and drew his own conclusions.

"It's a plain case of self-defense," Masters said. "If I were you, I'd get the record cleared while you've got witnesses."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Clay asked.

"I'd go to Ft. Smith," he said. "The Federal Court there has jurisdiction over all this territory."

"Before the Hanging Judge?" Clay demanded.

Masters shrugged. "He's hard; but he has to be. Most of the folks who come before him ought to have the book thrown at them—cattle thieves, train-robbers, whiskey-peddlers, murderers. He's all the law there is in seventy-four thousand square miles."

"He's plenty tough," Clay agreed. "But nothing happens to the Owl Hoot Gang."

Masters flushed.

"No one's right sure who belongs to it or where it is. Till some one can prove something, there's no good talking. Now, this matter of yours—Arkansas Deefy runs this county and he's not going to like you finishing off two of his toughest boys single-handed. Cherokee'll be laying for you, too. He meant business when he gobbled at you."

Clay shrugged.

"I can handle Cherokee. But how does Deefy stand with the Bloody Judge down there?"

"You've got the judge wrong," Masters insisted. "Good or bad, he doesn't wear any man's collar."

Clay believed him. They rode into Ft. Smith like two friends on a holiday. Every one seemed to know Pat Masters. Every one seemed to admire him. At the jail, Clay learned for the first time that he was a deputy United States marshal. He learned, too, that the judge was out of town. He might be back in a month, two months. There was nothing for Clay to do but wait for him—in jail.

"I'm putting your horse in the livery stable," Masters said before he left. "I've got some unfinished business in Little Midas; but I'll be back for the trial. I'll bring Driscoll and the storekeeper with me."

Clay still believed him. There was an openness and candor about him that invited confidence. But the dust of his horse's hoofs had not settled when the judge returned to Ft. Smith. In his absence, the jails had been filled. He emptied them in the only way he seemed to know. There were no continuances, and no reprieves. His was the only court in the country—except the Supreme Court at Washington—from which there was no appeal. Pat Masters was not at the trial. Nor was Driscoll. Nor the

storekeeper. But Cherokee was there, dark, thick-bodied, careful of tongue.

"Some men are born with the Mark of Cain on them," the judge thundered at the close of the evidence. "They are born to murder and hang. You were picked up in Little Midas. I am convinced the most vicious band of robbers in all my years on the bench is holed up there. You are obviously a man of some education—a leader. If you do not return there, bank robberies may stop. A snake cannot crawl far without its head."

Clay did not listen. He did not think the judge believed him the leader of the Owl Hoot Gang; but it did not matter. He was remembering the judge's unexpected absence, his unexpected return. He was remembering that Arkansas Deefy was a power in the land; that Cherokee was in court to testify against him; that Pat Masters and Driscoll were not.

He was remembering that there was no appeal from the judgment of this court, and that he was not ready to die. He was remembering with overwhelming bitterness that he had trusted Pat Masters with his life—and lost; and that the job he had come to do was still undone.

When the jailer brought his food that evening, he was waiting. In the morning, when attendants entered the cell, they cut the jailer free from the long strips of blanket with which Clay had bound him. In the morning, too, the livery stable keeper found that the dun pony Masters had left with him was gone. In the morning, Clay was well on his way back to the little Midas country and a day of reckoning.

HE SPURRED the dun pony away from the pointed finger that said "500 Miles to Ft. Smith—And Hell!" pushing toward the rolling hills whose depths hid Arkansas Deefy's ranchhouse and, if his hunch was correct, the Owl Hoot Gang. Behind the hills loomed the vast, greenish blue of pine-clad mountains, their bare peaks glowing rosily above the timberline.

Ahead of him stretched the prairie, dotted by pigmy homestead shacks surrounded by patches of ripening crop lands. Driscoll's farm was one of them and the others belonged to men like him who had come to devour the cattle range as grasshoppers devour fields of corn.

The rays of the sun came straight down and powdered alkali puffed from the grasses under the dun's hoofs. A long line of smoky gray curved through one of the fields and hung above it. Swinging there, it seemed to move in a half circle as if eating into the ripening grain.

Clay studied it through narrowed eyes and saw, here and there, the thin lick of a tongue of flame. It was not a line of dust. The field was on fire! Months of patient labor, years of starved hope of land-hungry men were burning with the grain!

Clay checked the impulse to ride forward and help fight the fire. He had saved Driscoll's life and the farmer had not bothered to come to his trial to testify in his defense. That his corn had needed hoeing or his fence needed mending had, perhaps, been more important to him. Clay had put his trust in Pat Masters, but as soon as the big marshal had him behind bars, he had deserted him. Clay was hunting his brother's murderers, and to find them, he must be at it.

"I've learned my lesson," he told himself bitterly, "From now on, other men's problems belong to them."

The trail rose slowly toward the foothills. It angled to the right where the homestead shacks clustered, but Clay paid no more attention to them than he did to the pungent odor of burning grasses.

He rounded a mass of jumbled boulders and came abruptly upon a twisting stretch of road lined with cottonwood trees.

Under the branches of the largest tree a man sat a pinto pony. In the dappled shadows of the hot afternoon, both horse and man seemed asleep and still as though chiseled from marble. The man's chin was

tipped forward on his chest. The horse dozed, its long head drooping toward the dust, one bony hip tipped higher than the other.

The man was Driscoll, the farmer.

Under the shock of recognition, Clay did not at first notice that the man's hands were tied behind him, or that a rope dangled from the branch above him and circled his neck. When hunger started the horse for its home pastures, the rope would drag Driscoll from its back to long, strangling death.

Clay had heard of this type of "border justice" meted out by bands calling themselves Regulators or Stranglers or Vigilantes or any of a dozen other vengeful, self-chosen names; but he had never seen it. It was of a piece with the shooting of unarmed men, with burned fields and perjured testimony before a high court, and, to his mind, Cherokee's dark face lurked behind it backed by the formless shadow of Arkansas Deefy, protected, perhaps, by the United States marshal.

Anger flashed through him in a mighty backlash that swept caution and self-interest off the board like discarded hands. He shook the dun into a trot, and its pounding hoofs woke the pinto. It shivered and crouched like a rabbit about to jump; but the dun shouldered into it and Clay's hand clamped on its bridle rein.

"You, Driscoll—again!" he said to the helpless man, mocking himself for interfering, for having learned his lesson so poorly, mocking Driscoll and his constant need of help for which he would not pay even the honest price of testifying in court.

Driscoll lifted his head, his eyes blank and dull. He had gone far on the desolate,

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lonely rode to death, and he groped his way back painfully.

"I thought you were in Ft. Smith," Driscoll said.

"Waiting to be hanged?" Clay giped.

"Waiting to be tried. Pat Masters and I were coming down as soon as the judge got back."

The man was still too numbed by what had happened to him, too dazed by that last, final solitude he had been facing to tell anything but the truth. Clay thought that the blame or credit for what had happened to him fell back on Cherokee and Arkansas Deefy and Masters. But that, too, could wait.

"Who did this?" he demanded, loosing the man's hands, casting off the rope about his neck, and leaving it dangling in the breeze.

"I don't know. They were masked," Driscoll said, rubbing his blue wrists to start the blood circulating. "I'd gone down to Paxtons. They were leaving the country, scared out just before harvest. I was trying to talk them into staying when some masked men rode up. They loaded the Paxtons in their wagon and started them on the road to Ft. Smith. They put me on one of their paint horses and left me here, like this."

"Was one of them Cherokee?" Clay demanded. "Or Pat Masters?"

"Cherokee, maybe," Driscoll said. "Not Masters. He's a square shooter."

"I believed that, too," Clay said bitterly. "We both almost hanged for believing it."

The breeze shifted and the smell of burning grain was sharper. For the first time, Driscoll seemed to grasp its meaning.

"They've fired the fields!" he cried and clapped his heels into the pinto's sides. "My wife's home—alone."

HE SET OFF at right angles to the trail. Clay followed him. He had nothing to lose. He might have much to gain. Since the Pinto did not belong to Driscoll, when they turned it loose, it would return home and lead them to one, at least, of the masked riders. Somewhere, close at hand, they would probably find Cherokee—perhaps Pat Masters and the Owl Hoot Gang.

They rode onto the open ground. One of the farms was gone—crops, barns, shack. Even the windmill lifted charred and smoking arms against the sky.

Driscoll explained, "The raiders made sure the Paxtons wouldn't come back."

The corn in the next field was smoldering. The buildings had begun to smoke. The gaping barn, the broken windows, the sagging fence, told that the place had been deserted weeks ago.

They urged their horses faster.

"The homesteaders are all going," Driscoll said soberly. "I reckon Sue and I'll have to move on, too. Somehow, I hadn't figured before on what might happen to her alone here without me."

The fire did not seem to have touched the Driscoll homestead. The crop lands, neat and golden behind their fences, the small, square house, the windmill turning idly, all lay peaceful under the sun. As they rode closer, they understood why. Broad and black around it, someone had plowed a fireguard. The rich loam curled on itself, wide and protecting.

As they looked, a team appeared at the farther corner of the barn. The horses lunged in their traces, their bellies almost against the ground, their hides matted with sweat and dust. The plow at their heels cut deep into the soil. The hands of the slim, denim-clad figure that guided it were firm on the lines.

"It's Sue," Driscoll cried and kicked the pinto into a gallop.

At the sight of him, the girl dropped the plow handles and ran toward him, her arms uplifted so that he could swing her to the saddle before him.

"You're all right?" she cried, her flushed cheeks smudged and tear-stained, the great braid of her hair swinging against his shoulder like a silken rope. "When you didn't come, I was afraid."

"I'm all right," he said gently. "And I'm proud of you!"

The air sharpened with smoke, and the horses at the plow snorted.

Leaving the Driscolls, Clay rode over and caught hold of a cheek strap. The girl was small and slight; yet, somehow, she had managed alone, to handle the heavy, frightened animals.

Alone! The word made him remember the job he had come alone to do.

"You," he said somberly to himself, "are the guy who wasn't going to horn in on other folks business again! But here you are!"

Clay would not have thought that the shabby one-room house could hold such a feeling of home. The wide plank floor was newly scrubbed. The cheap curtains at the two small windows were crisp and gay. The rough furniture had been fashioned carefully.

Driscoll paused on the threshold, his arm about his wife.

"We'll never have a place I like so well," he said slowly.

She pressed against him. It was as if she wanted to shut the two of them safe and close inside its walls.

"Nothing's going to happen to us," she said. "I need you. I couldn't go on without you!"

His face softened, but he said doggedly, "We've got to move on. You've got to be safe."

She shook her head.

"We're staying," she said simply. "There wasn't anything safe for the Pilgrim women; but they helped their men fight the Indians and build their homes. There wasn't anything safe for the women whose men followed Daniel Boone; but they went with them just the same. There's nothing safe for us; but, if we won't fight for what belongs to us, we deserve to lose it!"

Clay watched her, standing small and flushed and determined; and, watching her, he knew that he was seeing the end of one way of life and the beginning of another. Men come to a country, fight it and other men, and drift on, careless as tumbleweeds; women strike their roots deep in a land and change it forever. It wasn't the farmers the cattlemen had to fear. It was their women.

"We've got to act fast," Clay said. "When people can't defend themselves, they have to attack. Let's turn the pinto loose, Driscoll, before they know you've escaped. Then, trail it to its home ranch."

THE FIRE had crept to the edge of the plowed ground and burned itself out when they unhitched Driscoll's two tired horses and put saddles on their harness-marked backs. Sue Driscoll refused to wait at the homestead, saying there was no safety anywhere, only an unequal battle to hold what was theirs. She wanted to share that battle. Driscoll unearthed an old revolver and she clung to a rabbit gun she

took from above the fieldstone fireplace.

The dun shifted restlessly, tossing his head and champing his bit; the pinto was eager to drift. When they knotted the reins over its saddlehorn, and it set off briskly toward the foothills, Driscoll said, "Looks like he's heading for the Circle Ten, but our horses can't keep up."

Clay nodded. "I'll go ahead," he said. "Keep a lookout on my trail."

The pinto ran straight into the foothills. It did not pause to graze or drink; and Clay thought, "He's one of a grainfed bunch and hankering to get back to soft living."

The sun was slanting toward late afternoon when the horse disappeared between angry red walls of bare earth. Clay did not drop into the canyon after him, for the pinto was evidently travelling an established trail. The ground was pocked with hoof-marks.

Half an hour back, Clay had seen the gray brush of chimneysmoke against the sky and guessed that it marked Arkansas Deefy's ranchhouse. Cautiously, he sent the dun through the trees along the rim-rock and came out above a grassy valley that lay like a pocket in pineclad hills. Below him, ranchhouse, bunkhouse, corrals, and shed sprawled in the long rays of the setting sun. He could see the pinto running toward them at a high lope.

A shout of welcome rose from the corrals. A cowboy spurred around the house and bore down on it, followed by half a dozen others. The pinto shied and flung up its head but decided in favor of the feed lot and let them close in. One of the riders caught its bridle rein and Clay recognized the big halfbreed. Cherokee laughed and gestured toward the empty saddle as he led the pinto toward the ranchhouse veranda where a huge, crab-like man with mighty shoulders and dangling arms stood watching everything with the intense concentration of the hard-of-hearing.

Clay thought he must be Arkansas Deefy, the evil shadow behind all that had occurred. Deefy's importance paled when a lean, red-headed figure hobbled from the house and took a place at the rail beside him. A crutch under the man's left arm lifted his shoulder high. His left leg was bandaged from toe to knee. Clay thought surely he must be the man his brother,

wounded and dying on the bank floor, had crippled, the man whose trail he had hunted so long.

Clay's mouth set in a hard line. Were all the trails he had followed converging on one point like the spokes of a wheel? His brother's killer, the man who had tried to murder Driscoll and lied Clay into the shadow of the gallows, the Owl Hoot Gang—were they all here, waiting? If only Pat Masters were in the ranchhouse, he thought grimly, all scores could be settled at once.

The men at the Circle Ten seemed in high spirits as Cherokee galloped the pinto past the porch and turned it over to one of the cowboys. From the depths of the house, the dinner triangle pounded metallicly and a Chinese singsong came thinly to the rim-rock, "Comee gettee! Comee gettee!"

Clay waited in the shelter of a rounded boulder. He could not approach the house in daylight. There were no trees or shrubs about it, as though Arkansas Deefy had guarded against any one's coming upon him unawares. But when darkness fell with the swift setting of the sun, when chow had been eaten and the men had gone to the bunkhouse, he would pay Arkansas Deefy a call.

The dun, nibbling buckbrush beside him, stopped and stared down their backtrail, small ears pricked and twitching. Minutes later, the Driscolls slipped noiselessly through the trees and into the shelter of the boulder beside him.

"We tied our horses back a ways," Driscoll explained. "They made too much noise coming through the brush."

"When it's dark enough, we'll go down," Clay told them. "You two take the bunkhouse. If any one comes out, don't palaver. Shoot to kill. I'll take the ranchhouse."

The sun set and the valley became a deep, black pool with the feeble lights of ranch and bunkhouse like dim reflections of the stars.

Clay left the Driscolls at their posts and drifted through the shadows to the open window of the livingroom. It was a big room, crisscrossed with heavy, smoke-blackened rafters. Its fireplace gaped empty across one wall. Indian blankets piled high on long divans. Hand-hewn chairs with sagging rawhide seats ranged around a scarred oak table. It was a man's room—strong and hard and comfortable.

Arkansas Deefy sat with his back to the window. He grasped the table top with viselike hands and his head drooped forward between his massive shoulders. Cherokee prowled the room, restless as a panther. The redhead was there, his bandaged left leg propped on a chair, his hands closed tight on his crutches. All three of them stared down the long table at the man, relaxed and indifferent, who was playing solitaire before the empty fireplace.

Clay stared, too, for the man was Pat Masters.

RECOGNITION was like a blow to him. He had suspected a tie between all men. He had even told himself that he would find Masters at the Circle Ten; but he had not believed it, and the fact of his presence here stunned him.

The pack of cards in Masters' hand dwindled and he looked up as if unaware of the tension about him.

"I'm going to win this time," he announced, pleased as a child.

"Then you'd better do it fast," said Deefy. His voice was flat and harsh. "We've decided what to do with you."

"Oh, that!" said Masters airily. "It's interesting, watching people hold potatoes too hot for them."

The slap of his red queen sounded loud against his black king but through it cut the short thunder of horse's hoofs. Someone was riding toward the house and riding fast.

Clay felt surging elation. Masters had not lied to him. He had not betrayed him. Unarmed, he was a prisoner on the Circle Ten and his life hung in the balance; but he was playing his game in his own way.

A horse stopped before the veranda. A rider pounded onto the porch and into the room. Clay had never seen the man before, but he knew the type—the muscle fine body, the ferret eyes, the low, narrow forehead.

"The clodhopper got away!" he announced. "Someone turned him loose!"

Cherokee sprang upon him, digging his fingers into his arm like claws as if to force more information from him; but the man had told all he knew.

"That settles it," said Deefy. "Our luck's run out. Red gets shot in Pawhunky. Squint gets killed in Little Midas. That fellow in Ft. Smith escapes. Masters trails us here

and almost takes us. Even a nester gets away from us. I'll start moving till my luck changes. But before I go, Mr. United States marshal—" His hand rose toward his holstered gun.

"The house is surrounded, Deefy," Masters said softly. "Look behind you."

"That's too old a trick," Deefy said grimly.

His gun levelled on Masters; but it was Clay who fired. Blood spurted from Deefy's shattered shoulder.

The room surged into bedlam. Pat Masters caught the edge of the heavy table, upending it and hurling it forward so that it knocked Deefy senseless. Red and the other cowboy leaped for the door and collided in mid air. While they staggered for their feet, Masters caught up Red's discarded crutch and laid about him lustily. All the while Cherokee's death gobble crowded the room as he and Clay exchanged shot for shot.

The duel between them was as strange and deadly as if they fired from the hard-held corners of a bandanna in a frontier duel. Neither tried to hide or to evade the other; but eye to eye, bullet for bullet, they fought.

Twice Clay heard the sickening plop of his lead in living flesh; but the big half-breed came on. A shot plowed a furrow in Clay's scalp and blood streamed down his face, blinding him. Cherokee's gun emptied and he leaped through the window on Clay.

Clay tore loose, wiping the blood from his eyes with a desperate hand. Redly, he caught the flash of Cherokee's knife and struck at the lifting blade with his hot gun barrel. There was the snap of breaking bone and Cherokee's breath came out in a

gust, harsh and guttural, drowning his gobbling.

He caught at Clay, trying to enfold him and crush him in his great arms, but Clay twisted free. A blow caught him in the ribs like a sledge. His lungs were bursting and blood, still streaming into his eyes, blinded him.

Staggering back, he lifted his sixgun and brought its barrel down with all his strength on Cherokee's head. Dimly, he heard a fusillade of shots from the bunkhouse. He heard Driscoll cry, "I'll kill the first man out!" Pat Masters shouted, "Put 'em up, boys. It's the Law."

Later, much later, with the wounded man bandaged and the outlaws under arrest, Masters grinned at Clay.

"I've been tailing this gang for months," he said. "I had a hunch Deefy's Circle Ten was a blind. But if it hadn't been for you, the job might have been my last."

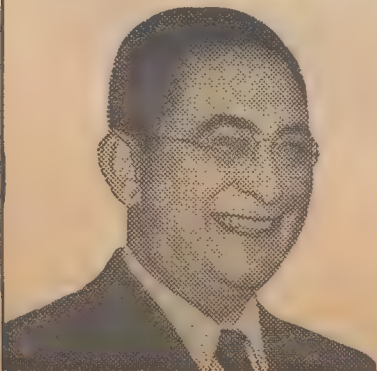
Under the dressing that circled his head Clay grinned back at him.

"You did a good one," he said. "But from now on, I'll have to keep a jump ahead of all Blood Ike's marshals—including you."

Masters chuckled.

"You're safe enough," he said sheepishly. "I arranged the whole thing to keep Deefy and Cherokee thinking they were sitting on top of the world so they'd get careless. A re-hearing and dismissal is waiting for you at Ft. Smith, and the Government will split the reward for these fellows between you and Driscoll."

"Give it to the Driscolls," Clay said. "It's enough for me that the Owl Hoot Gang's finished off. Now all I want is to get back to my ranch at Pawhanty."



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Novel



"We got 'em—just as they was putting a rope around John Macklin's neck!"

Chapter I

KILL 'EM IN COUGAR WELLS!

IT HAD BEEN a weary ride from the capitol, and ordinarily Race McGee would have relaxed at the end of his journey.

But instead of relaxing him, the very sight of Cougar Wells brought an added tension to his lean body. He'd been in Cougar Wells five years ago. He'd been a

IN COUGAR!

By JAMES SHAFFER



Cougar Wells was a waiting town—waiting with a noose in its murderous hand. . . . Waiting for Ranger Race McGee to give over the death warrant that would mean freedom for the man it condemned—and death for the man who delivered it!

beardless stripling of nineteen then, two years before he'd joined the state rangers, and he'd been hoping that perhaps no one in town would recognize him. At first, that is.

But the hope was doomed to disappointment from the first. The dust cloud his weary mount had kicked up must have been spotted while he was miles from town. Because there was a reception committee waiting for him.

The town looked the same as it had five years ago—a little more weathered maybe, the falsefronted buildings a little more dusty, if such were possible. Otherwise, it had the same outward look.

But there was a tension in the town; a strong current of hate and suspicion that hadn't existed five years ago. Of course, five years before, the first homesteader was guiding his gaunt team into town and looking around for the most likely place to settle. There hadn't been even a handful of homesteaders in the whole county, then.

And those few were viewed with contempt by such men as John Macklin. The big rancher hadn't even accorded the homesteaders the dignity of giving them their moving orders. No one had expected the homesteaders to hang on.

And now John Macklin, the mighty John Macklin, one of the biggest men in the state, was in the squat jail house of Cougar Wells, sentenced to life imprisonment for the backshooting murder of a young engineer.

It was Race McGee's job to transfer John Macklin from the jail in Cougar Wells to the state pen.

Race's pale blue eyes hardened as they swept each side of the street of the little town. He didn't relish the job ahead of him. He'd tried to kid himself that it was going to be simple; that all he'd have to do was ride in and ride out with Macklin. But he'd known he was kidding himself.

The single long dusty street of the town was empty of people, but he knew that the town was teeming with life; that the sagging false-fronted buildings were bulging with men. The left side of the street was lined with saddle horses, hipshot in the late afternoon sun. The right side held the stolid wagons of the homesteaders. Race swore under his breath.

He swore at gutless Sheriff Andrews, who had refused to transfer his prisoner

to the state pen; his refusal that had made this job for Race necessary. His horse caught the scent of the water trough at the other end of the block and quickened its pace. Race gave the animal its head. It had been a hot, dusty ride from the capitol.

A door on the left side of the street squeaked and flapped. Race didn't have to turn his head to see the man that came out of the Desert Queen saloon. And he knew the man.

Thad Malone was foreman of the mighty Rocking M, the empire that John Macklin had built. John Macklin gave the orders, and it was Tad Malone that saw that they were carried out. He didn't care who was hurt in their execution.

Malone was big—he lacked one inch of reaching the six feet four inches of his boss. But there was a width and strength in his shoulders that more than made up for that one inch. His spurs tinkled softly on the boardwalk as he swaggered toward the water trough. He held a sheath knife in one hairy hand, digging dirt from the fingernails of his other hand with the sharpened point.

He reached the trough and idly jabbed the knife into the water soaked planks. His jaw worked and he spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dust.

"You got business in this town, stranger?" The words rumbled out of his deep chest like distant thunder, growing nearer.

"Wouldn't be here if I didn't, would I?" Race countered quietly.

"Don't give me no lip, mister," Malone grunted. Without turning his head, he bawled: "Al!"

A squat, bowlegged man pushed through the doors of the Desert Queen and came humping down the sidewalk. Race glanced at the man idly, searched his memory briefly and came up with a name: Al Ohio.

"Know this gent?" Thad Malone grunted.

"Shore," Al replied promptly. "Name's Race McGee. State Ranger."

"Hi, Al." Race said calmly. "Understand that jury turned you loose."

Al scowled, but made no reply. Malone rumbled deep in his throat and jammed the knife back into the sheath that hung from

his gunbelt. Then he looked at McGee. "One man, huh!" Malone snorted. "One man the governor sends down to take Macklin to the pen! The governor's a fool!"

"Only one man going to the pen, isn't there?" Race asked quietly. "Don't take a whole army to get him there, does it?"

"It'll take a whole damned army to move Macklin from that jail to the pen!" Malone rumbled harshly.

Race swung out of the saddle and pulled his mount from the trough. He started to lead the horse away, but Thad Malone blocked his way, and the big foreman showed no sign of moving. Race put his hand against Malone's chest and pushed. Malone gave way a step, smoldering anger beginning to smoke up his eyes.

"The hoss needs rest," Race said. "See you later, Malone."

He heard the forman growling profanity deep in his chest but he didn't look back. Just a few feet down the street was the livery. He led his horse there and turned it over to the holster, with instructions for its care. Farther down the single street of Cougar Wells opened up into the town square. On the opposite side of the square stood the little squat jail. Race stepped up to the sidewall and started that way.

"Just a minute, ranger!"

"Now what?" Race growled impatiently as he turned. He'd been passing the Oasis saloon—on the right side of the street. The nester side. A black-bearded man was stepping out of the Oasis. Race cast a glance at the water trough. Malone and Al Ohio were watching. The big man took hold of Race's arm and tugged.

"Wanna talk to you—inside," he ordered. Race shook his hand off, staring at the man's flat-heeled boots, and bib overalls that marked him for a farmer.

"You're Carlton?"

"That's me," the man snapped, taking Race's arm again. "And I wanta talk to you. Inside, ranger!"

RACE twisted free. Carlton, he saw, had been drinking. The man made a clumsy grab at him and Race brought the flat of his hand across the man's face. Carlton stuttered a curse and went backwards. Race slapped him again, and Carlton continued to stumble backwards. Race

shoved him then, and Carlton stumbled through the doors of the Oasis. Race followed him.

The place was full of farmers; they lined the long bar, and they sat hunched around the card tables. The liquor had been flowing free here, and half a dozen men growled angrily as Carlton stumbled back inside.

"Don't try to manhandle me, Carlton!" Race snapped. "If you got anything I should hear, I'm willing to listen, but never try to manhandle me."

For a moment, black fury surged in Carlton's eyes; his stocky, muscle-slabbed body was tense. Then he relaxed shrugged.

"Okay, ranger, I was wrong. Guess those last drinks kinda went to my head.

"What's on your mind, Carlton?"

"You're here to take Macklin to the pen?" Carlton asked quickly.

"I'm here on direct orders from the governor," Race told him quietly. "And I ain't discussing them orders with nobody."

"Aw, why quibble?" another man broke in. "We know the governor sent you here to bring Macklin to the pen. On account of the no-good son, Sheriff Andrews, won't do the job hisself."

"John Macklin got a fair trial, ranger," Carlton broke in. "A fair trial before a jury—and Malone or Andrew, or anybody else that says he didn't is a liar!"

"What's all this leading up to?" Race asked quietly, but somehow he thought he knew the answer before he asked.

"Just this," Carlton said harshly. "Andrews says Macklin didn't get a fair trial, and that he's gonna keep him in that jail and not send him to the pen—until he gets a pardon through from the governor."

"And we aim to see that Macklin goes to the pen," another man broke in. "They claimed that this state would never let a cattle baron like Macklin be convicted of no crime. They claimed that cattlemen like him was kings, and above the ordinary law."

"But we got a fair trial with Judge Breeden on the bench and convicted Macklin of murder," Carlton went on. "We convicted him on circumstantial evidence and the judge wouldn't pass the death sentence—just life imprisonment."

Race nodded wearily. He'd been hearing

about this case for weeks now. These farmers had built themselves a dam—for an irrigation project. The dam wasn't complete yet. There were engineering difficulties, and the farmers had brought in an engineer from outside. Macklin had tried to buy the engineer off, so the story went. Tried to bribe him to build the dam in such a way that it would fail during the first big rainstorm.

But the engineer was young and eager, and he valued his reputation as an engineer, more than Macklin's cash, and he'd refused. More than that, he'd talked.

He'd lived less than a week after that, before he was murdered in cold blood. At first, John Macklin had made no attempt to hide his own guilt, and for just the reason that the farmers had set forth. The cattlemen thought themselves above the law.

It wasn't until Sheriff Andrews had actually been forced to arrest Macklin for murder, that the man had begun to get worried. And the arrest of John Macklin for the killing of a tenderfoot engineer had exploded like a bomb in state politics. Macklin was a power through the whole state.

The trial had dragged on for weeks, with Macklin's battery of legal talent using every dodge to get him free. But all the tricks had failed, and Judge Breeden had passed sentence of life imprisonment.

"I'm acquainted with the whole case," Race cut through the babble of voices. "How come you drag me in here?"

"Just this," Carlton said stubbornly. "Every farmer in this county aims to help you get John Macklin to the pen. If Thad Malone and Sheriff Andrews think—"

"If I need any help carrying out my orders I'll let you know," Race said coldly and swung out of the Oasis. The saloon burst into a babble of angry voices, but he shrugged and kept on going. Across the street. Thad Malone and two or three gun-hung riders lounged in front of the Desert Queen. He felt their eyes boring into his back as he strode across the square toward the jail.

Before he reached the jail, two men strolled into sight. Farmers they were, from their garb, and each man carried a shotgun under his arm. They kept a wary eye up the street.

"What's this?" Race demanded. The two men, both of them rather young, merely stared back at him. Race felt anger building up within him at the stolid silence of the two men. Before he could speak again however, he heard Carlton's hail from the Oasis.

"He's a ranger—state ranger, boys. Come to take Macklin to the pen."

The two young men grinned. One of them shifted his shotgun and shoved out his hand.

"My name's Joe Stanley. This is Pete Lasser. Glad to know you, ranger. Sure glad to see you get here."

Race flung a glance over his shoulder, then faced the two. "Ain't you two got better sense than to parade around the jail with those guns? This town is a powder keg, and it won't take much to blow it skyhigh."

"Carlton's orders," Joe Stanley said promptly. "Right after Macklin was convicted there was a lot of talk about breaking him out of jail. There's been two of us farmers guarding the jail ever since. Macklin is going to the pen!"

Race grunted and stalked on toward the jail. He was liking the job that had brought him here less and less. He'd expected to find Cougar Wells in a touchy frame of mind, but certainly nothing like this. Certainly not two armies, ready to do battle at the drop of a hat. He lifted a hand to his shirt pocket, feeling the paper there. Remembering what it was brought a cold sweat to his forehead.

HE STEPPED across the sagging wooden porch of the jail and turned the knob of the door. It was locked. He knocked, heard a chair squak protestingly and then footsteps approach the door.

"Who're you?" demanded the man that opened the door. He was tall and gaunt, with a drooping, straggly mustache, heavy eyebrows shading cold gray eyes, and a badge pinned to his worn blue serge vest.

"Race McGee, state ranger. You're Sheriff Andrews?"

"Come in, if you want," Andrews grunted sourly. Race stepped inside and stopped in surprise.

He'd never seen John Macklin, but from the description he'd had, he knew the man seated at the sheriff's desk was Macklin.

Six foot four, over two hundred pounds, and with iron gray hair and jet black eyes framing a hard jaw and a thin, tight mouth.

But that wasn't the surprise. The surprise was that Macklin wasn't even locked up. He was seated at the sheriff's desk, and a regular banquet was spread out before him. A gunbelt with two guns, evidently the sheriff's was draped over a chair within easy reach of the prisoner.

Macklin glanced up as Race came in, but didn't speak. Not until he'd cut a chunk off the haunch of beef on the desk did he look up. Then he laid the heavy knife down, and picked up the piece of meat.

"State ranger, huh?" Macklin snapped. "You bring my pardon?"

"What makes you think you'll get a pardon?" Race asked.

"Don't give me no lip, ranger," Macklin rasped. "Or I'll have you kicked off the ranger force."

"Strong talk, ain't it, for a man that's under a sentence of life imprisonment?" Race said mildly.

"You think I'm going to the pen?" Macklin roared. "Think I'm going to let a lot of mangy farmers railroad me to a cell for the rest of my life? You ain't talking to no two-bit grub-line rider, mister—you're talking to John Macklin—and don't forget it."

"If you've got a pardon, trot it out," Sheriff Andrews grunted as he slid back into his chair. "Then you better get out of town fast."

"I'm not taking orders from you, sheriff," Race snapped. "On the other hand, I'm liable to start giving you some—like telling you to lock this prisoner up, instead of letting him live like a king in your office."

"Don't come into my office and tell me what to do!" Sheriff Andrews snarled. "If you've brought that pardon, hand it over!"

The door behind Race opened and slammed shut. Thad Malone stomped inside. "You mean he's got the pardon, boss?" Malone grunted. "Hell, I'll turn 'im upside down and shake it outta him."

Malone's big hand reached for Race's shirt collar. Race's anger boiled over at last. His right fist lashed out, struck solid bone as it collided with Malone's jaw. The foreman grunted with pain and Race swung

again, driving his left into Thad's stomach. Malone went backwards, slamming full force against the door.

His breath sucked in with a sharp hissing sound. "Want a stomping, huh?" he snarled. "You've earned it, and you'll get it!"

He charged forward, launching himself with a kick against the door. Sheriff Andrews swore softly and started to move, but John Macklin chuckled with pleasure and ordered the sheriff to give them room.

"Let Thad teach him a lesson," Macklin said quickly. "A lesson not to give no lip to John Macklin or any of his men."

Race heard no more. Thad was on him. The big foreman outweighed him by a full thirty pounds. Confined in the office, Race had no chance to stay out of the bigger man's reach. And yet he knew that if he allowed Malone to fight at close quarters, he was as good as gone. This fight he'd have to win, and win quick.

Malone's fist whistled toward his head. He ducked, and the blow glanced off. Even then, it had the force to stun him for a second, and that second was all Malone needed. Race heard the man's whistling breath as he dived in. Race let him come. And at the instant that Malone reached him, Race let himself drop flat on his back. He flung his feet upward. They caught Malone full in the stomach.

Race brought his feet up over his head. Malone was lifted off the floor. He squawled an oath as Race swung the big foreman forward. Suddenly the weight on Race's feet was gone. Malone slammed head-on into the wall with the force of a battering ram. Race sprang up.

Malone was staggering blindly, his big hands groping. Race grabbed a fist full of the man's hair with his left hand. He jerked Malone's head down with that hair; at the same time bringing his right fist crashing against the man's jaw. Thad Malone sighed and fell with a bump that shook the office.

He whirled to face the sheriff and John Macklin, but neither had moved. They were staring in open-mouthed surprise at the unconscious form of the big foreman.

"Tell him when he wakes up," Race grated harshly, "the next time he comes at me I'll kill him."

"The next time he comes at you, he'll

kill you," John Macklin said softly. "Now pass over that pardon, and you can be out of town before Thad wakes up."

"Any legal papers I got I'll turn over to Judge Breeden, according to my orders," Race said stiffly. He picked up his hat and stalked out.

The two nester guards had curiosity written all over their faces as he came out of the office. He asked Joe Stanley which was Judge Breeden's house and walked off before either man could question him about what had happened in the sheriff's office.

Judge Breeden's house was half a block from the town square down a shady little side street. The judge, wearing a soiled linen suit, let him in.

"I'm Race McGee," he introduced himself as the judge waved him to a chair. "The governor sent me—about John Macklin's trial."

"Macklin's trial!" Judge Breeden snorted angrily. "There's too much hullabalo about that man's trial. He got a fair one, and he was found guilty! That's all there is to it."

"You think he's actually guilty?" Race asked quietly.

"Of course I think he's guilty, or I wouldn't have given him life!" Judge Breeden rasped. "The governor should have more men with you to take Macklin to the pen. There might be trouble here in Cougar Wells."

Race shook his head sadly. "Only one man was needed to do the chore I'm doing."

The judge stared. "You don't mean—"

Race nodded. "I've got Macklin's pardon in my shirt pocket."

Chapter II

BLOOD FOR THE BUZZARDS

JUDGE BREEDEN gasped. "I don't believe it!"

Race grinned wryly. "It's been burning a hole in my shirt pocket ever since I started. You see, I know how the cattlemen of this state have been treating the homesteaders, and I know they've been getting away with it. It's because they've had political power." He dug into his shirt pocket and drew out the pardon. "It's true enough that I've got it. Here it is."

The judge waved his hand. "I didn't mean that I doubted your word, McGee.

What I meant was that I didn't believe the governor would sign a man's pardon before that man had served a day of his jail sentence. I always thought we had an honest and fearless governor."

"We have," Race sighed. "You just don't realize how much pressure the political big wigs have been putting on him"

"They've put pressure on him before," Judge Breeden grunted.

"That's right. But hthis time, there are a lot of lies mixed up in it. They've convinced the governor that John Macklin was railroaded, that he didn't have a fair trial—"

"A pack of dirty lies!" Breeden rapped out. "I leaned over backwards to give Macklin every chance during the trial. He was as guilty as any man ever was."

"I know," Race nodded. "But I heard some of the big cattlemen talk—the ones that were putting on the pressure. They said that if Macklin ever spent one day in the pen it would give other homesteaders all over the state the idea that big cattlemen could be handled by the law like anyone else."

"And that would break their power quicker than anything," Breeden agreed gloomily. "The cattlemen have built up an illusion that they are above the ordinary law. That they can take the law in their own hands any time they choose. And as long as they can keep the general public believing that, there'll be no justice in this state!"

Race nodded and dropped the pardon on the desk in front of the judge. "I aimed to tell Macklin about this the minute I got to town. But when I saw the way Sheriff Andrews was treating Macklin—like a visiting duke—I decided to bring it to you." He made a wry face. "But I suppose it was just prolonging the agony."

"I'm glad you didn't let anyone know about it," Breeden said excitedly. He picked up the paper and locked it securely in his desk drawer. Race shook his head thoughtfully.

"Is it legal to hold out on it?" he asked doubtfully.

Judge Breeden was past sixty-five. Ordinarily at the age when a man puts his fighting years behind him, and is content to let things take their natural course. But there was no mistaking the glint in his old

blue eyes now, nor the belligerent jut of his jaw. He crashed a bony fist down on the desk.

"It's as legal for me to hold that pardon up, as it is for the governor to pardon a man before his sentence starts!" he rapped out.

"You'll only be prolonging the inevitable, won't you?" Race asked. "I think it best to serve it right away and scatter those homesteaders before they shed blood."

"Do you want to see that pardon served to Macklin on a silver platter?" Judge Breeden asked.

"Hell no," Race answered promptly. "I been following this case. Macklin is guilty as hell in my book."

The judge nodded. "Mine too. And another thing. If I serve that pardon, it's as good as admitting that I conducted a crooked trial to railroad Macklin to prison."

"But what can we do?" Race asked. "It's only ten miles from here to Joshua City. There's a telegraph line from there to the capitol. Macklin's already impatient and he'll start wiring some of his influential friends in the capitol and they're sure to tell him the pardon has been issued."

"Only one thing to do," Judge Breeden said. "Go to the capitol and talk to the governor. We'll both go. I'm sure that when I tell the governor how this trial was conducted, and explain the evidence against Macklin, he'll rescind that pardon."

Race nodded, glancing out the judge's window. It was growing dark outside, and already the lights downtown were being lit. From the judge's window, he could see the downtown section of Cougar Wells. The street was ominously quiet.

Another thing I can tell the governor, he thought, is just how much bloodshed will be spilled on the streets of this town if that pardon goes through.

The judge was busy rummaging through his desk. "McGee, there's a stage leaving here in a couple of hours. It makes connections with the midnight train at Joshua and we can be in the capitol by morning. You go down to the stage office and get us a couple of tickets. I'll get some papers on that trial together to convince the governor that Macklin is guilty."

Race nodded and let himself out the front door. He could still feel the tension in the town as he neared the square. One

side of the street was still lined with saddled ponies, and the other with farmers' wagons. It looked as though both sides intended to make a night long seige out of it—both sides afraid the other intended to pull a fast one.

The lone street light near the livery cast a pale yellow circle on the town square. Race stepped into the light, the flesh on his back creeping as he realized that he was a target for every eye—for every gun—in town. He forced himself to walk with the same steady stride, bending his steps toward the hotel.

"Hay, McGee. Come 'ere. Want to talk to you."

Race paused, throwing a glance over his shoulder at Sheriff Andrews, framed in the lighted doorway of his office. For a moment he was tempted to keep going, then he shrugged and walked to the jail. Andrews motioned him inside.

The big meal on the sheriff's desk had been cleared away, and there was no one in the office except Sheriff Andrews. Race glanced along the narrow corridor that ran along the cell blocks toward the back of the building. There was a light in the last cell down the corridor, and tobacco smoke drifted through the bars.

"I see you've got your prisoner locked up, finally," Race said sarcastically. "How come you suddenly don't like his company—putting him in the last cell?"

SHERIFF ANDREWS flushed angrily. Race had seen situations like this before. A sheriff, long in office, who owed his position to the cattlemen, could hardly bring himself to jail one of his benefactors. That was only human nature.

On the other hand, the country was changing. The day of the free range and the cattle barons was passing. The cattle man was just an ordinary citizen now, no longer a king.

"I brought him out to feed him. I'd do as much for any prisoner," Sheriff Andrews grunted.

"For any prisoner, so's he was a cattleman," Race said. "Better catch up with the times, sheriff. I know John Macklin has been kingpin in this country a long time. You owe your badge to him. You can count on him come election time. But times are changing, and Macklin's kind are out."

"I didn't ask you here to give me a preaching," Andrews said.

"Then why did you ask me?"

"Uh—that is—uh—where the devil is Judge Breeden?"

"At his house. Where else?"

"Ain't he coming down here to the jail, I mean?" Sheriff Andrews blustered.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Race steadily, thinking hard.

"You know dang well—uh—that is—you mean to say the governor didn't—?" the sheriff broke off in confusion. Race watched him narrow-eyed. He wondered if the sheriff had any advance information about the pardon. He was vaguely uneasy about holding it up.

Then he shrugged. He'd been supposed to turn the papers over to Judge Breeden. The judge was the right man to handle the pardon. If the judge chose to hold it up, it was none of Race's affair.

On the other hand, if Macklin and his crew knew the pardon was signed, there would be trouble aplenty before the night was over. He looked hard into the sheriff's eyes and read the confusion there. He sighed with relief. He was sure the lawman didn't know the pardon existed.

"That all you wanted to ask me?" Race queried.

"Yeah. I'll run up and see the judge myself in a little while," Andrews mumbled.

He was stepping down the sidewalk, toward the sign *Stage Depot* when the door of the Oasis saloon opened behind him. It was Carlton, the homesteader. The man had sobered up.

"What time you aiming to take Macklin from the jail?" Carlton asked. Half a dozen homesteaders crowded out the door behind him.

"You let me run my job my own way," Race told him.

"Just wanted to be of help if we could," Carlton said quickly. "Take my advice and don't try to move him at night. That crew of his ain't a bit above—"

"I said I'd run my job," Race snapped and turned on his heel. But he knew every eye in town was following him as he stepped into the brightly lighted stage office.

"Two tickets for Joshua City," he told the sleepy-looking clerk. The sleepiness left the clerk immediately. He blinked rapidly at Race.

"Okay," the clerk said quickly, and then hesitated. "Do—do you want the stage to yourself—I mean I can hold the other passengers over in case you don't want anybody else riding it tonight." He put a peculiar emphasis on the last word. Race frowned.

"I don't care how many other people ride the stage tonight," he snapped and stalked out. The crowd was still standing in front of the Oasis. Not wanting to be bothered with them again he crossed the street. Then he swore. Macklin's crew was coming out of the Desert Queen, trailing the dragging footsteps of Thad Malone up the street.

Race stopped, then stalked out to the middle of the street. On each sidewalk, a silent group of men watched him.

"I'm not playing either side in this town," Race said loudly. "Macklin's trial is over, and I was sent here merely to do a job. I intend to do it without help from either side, or"—he paused a moment—"without any interference from either side. That clear?"

He heard Thad Malone's deep rumbling curse, and he started walking slowly down the middle of the street. The yellow light from the street lamps splashed on the battered face of the Rocking M foreman. Malone's big hands dropped to gun butts riding his hips, but the motion didn't go any farther. Race went on past the two groups. He heard Carlton order his men back into the Oasis, and heard the tingle of spurs as Thad Malone herded his men back into the Desert Queen.

Judge Breeden was beaming when he got back. "I've got all my records of that trial," he said. "I'm sure that when I show it to the governor, he'll rescind that pardon. You get our seats on the stage all right?"

Race nodded. "I wish there was some way to break the tension in this town, judge. The slightest move from either bunch will start guns blasting and there'll be dead men in the streets."

"I know," the judge sighed. "I've talked my head off to both sides, but neither will give in."

"Suppose you go to the capitol by yourself, judge. I'll stay in town and try to keep trouble from busting out."

The judge cocked an eyebrow. "Mebbeso you're right. But I don't know whether

one man could do much. And you won't get much help from Andrews. That is, you won't get any help from him unless it's the farmers that start the trouble. Then you'll get all the help you need."

"I'm going to talk to Carlton. He's sober now, and he seems to have a level head."

"He's a good man and will listen to reason. It's been Macklin's crew that's caused all the trouble up to now. But you can see Carlton later. Right now, let's have something to eat."

Race hesitated. The quicker he talked to Carlton, the quicker the tension in Cougar Wells would die down. But the smells from the kitchen was tempting to a man who'd ridden all day with no hot meal. He tossed his hat on the chair and followed the judge into the kitchen.

He was sopping up the last of the brown steak gravy with a biscuit when he heard the commotion. It started mildly with men yelling, but quickly grew to a wild roar of sound. All hell had suddenly popped loose in Cougar Wells.

HE SNATCHED his hat as he raced through the house and out into the street. Judge Breeden was hot on his heels.

The town square was crowded with farmers and cowboys alike. All were surging in a solid throng toward the jail. Men were crowding in the sheriff's office. One man carrying a little black medical bag was trying to reach the office door.

He caught the ugly undercurrent of the crowd as he reached the edge of it and started pushing his way through to the office.

Then suddenly a gaunt figure was looming in the doorway of the office. The figure raised a stubby sawed-off shotgun and blasted both barrels over the heads of the crowd.

"The fool!" Race gritted. "A shot now is like juggling dynamite."

Strangely the shots quieted the crowd for a moment, and the figure in the doorway raised his voice:

"Hold up! Hold up!" Andrews yelled. Race rushed through the crowd to the jail porch. Andrews' face was covered with blood from a gash in his scalp.

"What's going on, Andrews?" It was Carlton, the leader of the homesteaders. His voice was ragged with fury.

"You oughta know, Carlton!" Sheriff Andrews bellowed back. "Your men have

taken John Macklin from the jailhouse. Took him out to hang him!"

It was like throwing a gunpowder keg on an open flame. A roar of rage shot out of half a hundred throats. The crowd surged forward. Composed as it was of both cowboys and farmers, it became a wild milling mob. In another instant fists were swinging, as cowboy and farmer started fighting each other.

Race battered his way across the porch and gained the doorway of the office. So far there had been no gunplay. It might break out any second. He remembered that the sheriff's two shots had made the crowd pause for an instant. He licked his lips and decided to chance it again. He lifted his gun and blasted three quick shots into the sky.

The rolling thunder of the shots brought a quick silence to the mob. Race took advantage of that to jerk a chair from the office.

"Farmers—git over on the left side of the street! Thad Malone, take your men to the other side! I'll put a bullet in the first man that swings another fist!"

It was pure bluff. The crowd was still densely packed, and he couldn't have picked out a single man for a target if he'd tried. Sweat broke out on him during the two or three seconds of quiet that followed his belated order. Slowly, grudgingly, the two sides fell back. He turned to Sheriff Andrews.

"Now, sheriff, what happened?"

The doctor had been sopping at the gash in the sheriff's scalp, wiping the blood away. The lawman moved to the edge of the porch, and was still standing.

"It was them two guards Carlton put around the jail," Andrews said loudly. "Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser. One of them come in the office and asked me for a match. I give it to him, and the next thing I knew, he slugged me with a gun barrel. He didn't knock me clear out."

An angry rumble came from Macklin's crew. Thad Malone started to shout an order to his men. Race dropped the muzzle and pulled the trigger. The slug plowed dirt in front of Thad's feet.

"Stay put! We'll hear the sheriff out."

"There ain't time!" Sheriff Andrews yelled. "Like I said, I wasn't plumb out—and I heard Joe and Pete saying as how they aimed to take Macklin out and hang

him from the low limb of a tall tree."

A chill of apprehension ran through Race. He expected gunfire to start ripping from the ranks of Malone's men. But there was none. Sheriff Andrews went on.

"I want a posse. I overheard where they aimed to do the hanging!"

Thad Malone's crew surged forward, and pandemonium broke loose on the porch. The crowd shoved Race back against the wall. Sheriff Andrews quickly handed out a dozen or more deputy badges and made an attempt at swearing in a posse.

Events moved with lightning rapidity, and within a matter of minutes, a huge posse was in the saddle, thundering out of town. The farmers, still standing where Race had ordered them, watched the whole thing in stunned silence. Race saw the posse disappear into the darkness, and then he walked over to Carlton.

"I'd never believed it. I never would," Carlton muttered under his breath. "I kept warning Joe and Peter not to make any move that could bring us trouble. They was just to watch and see that Macklin's men didn't try anything funny, that's all."

"Then you're sure you didn't know anything about this jail delivery?" Race asked. Then he realized the question was misplaced. The dumbfounded look on Carlton's face was answer enough for that.

Judge Breeden walked over. "This is a helluva note," he grunted. "Got any suggestions as to what to do now, McGee?"

Race shook his head. Over on the jail-house porch there was a lone figure, stuffing things back into his little black bag. The doctor. Race strolled that way.

"You didn't get much chance to patch up the sheriff's head, did you, Doc?"

The medico shook his head. "All I could do was wipe the blood away, smear some iodine on it and slap a bandage on it. Reckon Andrews'll live till he gets back, though."

"Reckon he will at that," Race said dryly. "He seemed plenty spry, collecting his posse."

"Just what you mean by that?" Judge Breeden asked after the doctor had trudged up the street.

"Judge, doesn't something about this whole thing strike you as awful funny?" Race asked.

"Just what are you driving at?"

"A lot of things—and maybe nothing,"

Race admitted gloomily. "But some things don't fit. For instance, if you were banged on the head hard enough to open your scalp, judge, do you think you would be doing what Sheriff Andrews was right afterward?"

"The lick didn't seem to hurt him much, that's true," the judge mused.

"Another thing. Carlton is the head of the farmers. They take orders from him."

The judge nodded. "He's been their spokesman ever since this fight started. None of them would pull anything without Carlton's orders."

"Yet two of them did—according to Sheriff Andrews' story. Two of the younger men pulled something on their own hook. From the dumbfounded look on Carlton's face, I'm sure he knew nothing of Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser's plan to grab Macklin and hang him."

"It begins to smell," the judge agreed. "A thing like they pulled would take a lot of planning. And yet the homesteaders were surprised at what happened."

They were walking slowly back to the judge's house, and each fell silent, busy with his own thoughts. It wasn't until they were in the judge's living room, that Race swore suddenly.

"Now I'm sure of it!" he rapped out suddenly.

"Of what?"

"That Macklin engineered his own jail delivery, and did it in such a way as to throw the blame on the nesters. Judge, are you too old to ride?"

"I am, but I will," Judge Breeden said.

Chapter III

TWO TICKETS TO TOMBSTONE

IT WASN'T until they were well out on the trail that the judge asked a question. "You've got a theory about this thing, McGee. What is it?"

"Those two stage tickets I ordered," Race said loudly over the whine of the wind in their ears. "That's what started the whole thing."

"Explain that."

"Macklin was expecting me to ride into Cougar Wells with his pardon. Well, I rode in, but I didn't bring out the pardon right away. Instead, Judge, *I bought two tickets on the stage leaving town.*"

"And Macklin thought—"

"That he had failed to get his pardon. So he could get out of jail and throw the blame on the nesters."

"Then if your figuring is right—" Judge Breeden said hollowly.

"We'll wait and see if it is."

A few miles out of Cougar Wells, they lost the trail of the posse. The posse had swung across hard rocky ground that left no hoof marks. Race pulled up, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. He questioned Judge Breeden about the lay of the land. The judge shook his head.

"About five miles farther on you run square into a row of foothills. It's rough, broken country, with a dozen or more canyons to choose from. They could have gone up any one of them."

Race swore with grim helplessness. "And while we're twiddling our thumbs, two innocent men are riding to their death."

"Take it easy, son," the judge advised. "You can be wrong about this whole thing, you know."

But Race wasn't wrong. The moon came up a little later on. They were approaching the row of foothills. A little after that they heard the faint rumble of gunfire. The sound rolled and rumbled out of the hills ahead, but they couldn't judge exactly where it came from.

"It's all over, Judge," Race said raspingly. "We might as well ride for town."

It still lacked two hours to daybreak when they racked their weary horses in front of the jail house. Race wasn't surprised to see a light shining in the Oasis saloon. He had a hunch that no farmer went home that night. He would have liked to have a drink, but he didn't want to go into the Oasis.

Judge Breeden, however, found a pint bottle in his saddle bags. They sat on the steps of the jail and sipped from the bottle.

Less than twenty minutes after they'd arrived in town, they saw the grim procession follow them in. The posse headed down the main street at a slow walk, and men came out of the Oasis to follow along. Even in the murky light, Race could see two horses that carried dead men flung over the saddles.

Led by Carlton, the farmers kept their distance from the posse, but paced it toward the jailhouse. Race swore.

"No need to wonder who those two dead men are," he ground out. "Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser." He pounded his fist against his knee. "And I was the cause of their deaths! If I hadn't kept quiet about that pardon, they wouldn't have died."

"You're wrong," Judge Breeden said quickly. "In the first place, you had no authority to tell anyone but me about the pardon. You merely carried out orders. In the second places, if you'd told about it the minute you hit town there would have been a gun battle. And a dozen men would be dead now."

The judge's words smoothed down the rage that Race felt. He knew the judge was telling it straight, but just the same—

"Let's listen to their story. Maybe there's a flaw in it," he told Breeden.

But there was no flaw in Sheriff Andrews' story, nor any in John Macklin's. The sheriff pulled his horse up short at the porch but didn't dismount.

"We got 'em!" he bellowed. "Rode up on 'em just as they was putting a rope around John Macklin's neck. We ordered 'em to stop and one of them fired. It wasn't till then that I ordered the posse to shoot. We kilt 'em both."

Judge Breeden got to his feet. "I haven't heard the whole story of how John Macklin was delivered from the jail," he said loudly. "Macklin, let's have your story."

"There ain't much to tell," Macklin said quickly. "I was dozing in my cell when I heard a thump in the office and heard Sheriff Andrews moan. The next minute, Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser has unlocked my cell. They shoved a shotgun in my face and told me to come with them. They took me out in the hills. Said they were going to hang me."

"They had the rope around my neck when the posse rode up. Sheriff Andrews ordered 'em to surrender. One of 'em, I don't remember which, shot at the posse and the posse opened fire. Both of them was killed."

A funny thing, Race thought to himself, that the whole posse could do such good shooting in the dark. Just hit Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser, and hadn't put a scratch on John Macklin. But Macklin's story was straight. It would stand up before any jury. Then Sheriff Andrews said, "Arch Hol-dren, where are you?"

Arch Holdren ran the big general store in Cougar Wells. He sided with neither cattlemen nor nester. He did business with both, and he walked the tightrope. The storekeeper pushed to the front now, looking about nervously.

"What happened when we rode up on Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser?"

"Well, the moon was up. We could see the three of them under a tree. Sheriff Andrews yelled at them to let Macklin loose. One of them fired at the posse and the posse returned the fire. Macklin yelled to come on down—they were both dead. Macklin had a rope around his neck when we rode up."

"That answers your question, don't it, Judge Breeden?" Macklin asked, a heavy note of sarcasm in his voice. Then he whirled to Andrews. "Sheriff, I demand protection from further attempts to lynch me!"

Sheriff Andrews lifted his hand, and like a well-rehearsed play, the whole posse dragged its guns and swung them toward the huddled farmers.

"Anybody that moves'll get shot," the lawman ordered. "Drop your guns to the ground. You was all in this business. I'll see that none of you pack guns in this town."

The nesters, caught flatfooted, could do nothing but drop their weapons. A Rocking M puncher, wearing a deputy's badge, collected the weapons.

"Now scatter to your homes," Sheriff Andrews ordered. "Stanley and Lasser will be buried this afternoon. But only their immediate families can attend the funeral. I don't want no crowds gathering in this town. Now git!"

There was some grumbling, some hesitation on the part of the nesters. But after a moment they broke up and trudged silently toward their wagons, shoulders sagging in defeat.

John Macklin swung off his mount, a sardonic grin of triumph on his face as he looked at Race.

"I think the governor will think better of giving me a pardon, after this high-handed outrage," he purred softly. "I don't think I'll have any trouble getting a full pardon at all."

Race started for the rancher, fists doubled, but Judge Breeden grabbed his arm.

"It's almost time for breakfast," the judge said and led McGee firmly off the jail porch.

They trudged through the darkened side street to the judge's house, each busy with his own thoughts. It was Race who asked the thought uppermost in each mind.

"What'll you do with the pardon now?"

"What can I do?" Breeden asked helplessly. "Serve it, I guess. I could have convinced the governor of Macklin's guilt in killing the engineer, but after what happened tonight, Macklin would get a pardon anyhow. The quicker I serve the pardon, the quicker—"

"The nesters will pull up stakes and leave the country," Race ended bitterly.

"There'll be less bloodshed that way," the judge agreed. "The nesters will lose their fight, but save their lives."

"The whole thing was engineered tonight!" Race said hotly. "Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser were innocent victims of murder—just like that engineer!"

"Got any proof?" Breeden asked hopelessly.

"The perfect murder has never been committed," Race ground out.

"It looks like it has been," the judge said drily. "Not one murder, but two. Stanley and Lasser. And I don't even know how they were murdered. The posse didn't do it. If the poses had fired at three men—all bunched together—Macklin would have been hit, too. The posse must have fired over the heads of the three—"

"JUDGE!" Race gripped Breeden's arm, a smile splitting his face. "Judge, where'll those two bodies be taken, to be fixed for burial?"

"At Hennessy's Funeral Parlor. Only undertaker in town. Why?"

"Never mind. If you aimed to ambush somebody between here and Joshua City, Judge, where would you do it?"

"Why, why—Lava Pass, I reckon. That's out in the badlands a few miles. Lots of old volcano rock. Road is just a narrow pass through the rocks—"

"I remember the place!" Race said quickly. "Judge, I'm going to give you a half-hour start. Fork your cayouse and head for Lava Pass, and be sure your shooting iron is working."

"What for?"

"Cause you're going to keep me from getting a skiful of lead!"

"If you'd tell me—"

"There ain't time, Judge. It'll be daylight in another hour. I got to work fast. Git going!"

He swung briskly back toward town. The Desert Queen was lit up like a Christmas tree, and sounds of merriment rolled out along the street. Macklin and his crew were celebrating the success of their plan. Race steered a wide berth around the saloon and headed for the livery. The liveryman pawed sleep out of his eyes.

"Why'nt you just git your own horse, without waking me up?" he grumbled.

"I want to rent your buckboard for the day," Race told him. "I'll hitch it up myself."

The liveryman grumbled and went back to sleep. Race harnessed a fast team and hitched them to the buckboard. He had already ascertained the position of Hennessy's funeral parlor, and now he drove the buckboard up to the rear of the Parlor and knocked on the door. In a few minutes the door opened.

"I'm Race McGee, state rangers," Race told him. "Mind if I come in?"

"Don't reckon. But how come?"

"Oh, just interested in Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser."

"Durn Sheriff Andrews, anyhow," Hennessy grumbled. "Making the burial so quick. Tain't decent. Still, neither boy had much of a family. Neither one was married."

"Guess they're sure plumb full of holes, ain't they?" Race asked innocently.

"Dang right. Never seen so many bullet holes!" Hennessy led the way to the room in which he prepared the bodies. He had two coffins laid out to receive the men. With Race's help, he lowered both men into the coffins and reached for the lids. It was then that Race drew his gun.

"Hennessy, I need those two bodies. Grab hold of the other end of this coffin and help me put it on the buckboard."

Hennessy stared. "You gone loco—stealing bodies thataway? Why—why, tain't decent! And there's a law again it!"

"Mebbe so, but I got a hunch Pete and Joe would like it this way—if they knew what I'm doing will bring their killer to justice. Git hold!"

They made two trips to the buckboard with their grim burdens, and then Race covered both coffins with a tarp. Hennessy stood by, seething with anger. Race sighed regretfully.

"Hate to do this, Hennessy. But I need a little time—"

He swung his gunbarrel deftly. The undertaker tried to duck, but the barrel caught him just above the ear. He wobbled a moment, then went down with a moan.

"Won't be out more than ten minutes. Just about right," Race said, "and climbed into the buckboard. A moment later, he was kicking up the dust out of Cougar Wells.

He guessed he'd reach Lava Pass about daybreak, at the speed he was making. The team he'd picked were sound with plenty of endurance. He kept them moving at a good clip. A few miles out of Cougar Wells, he topped a rise and glanced back.

The yellow lights of town gleamed dully in the distance. And even as he looked, he could see the lights blotted out—as if men were running back and forth in front of them. He grinned mirthlessly. Hennessy had awakened and spread the word of the body-snatching.

A while later, gray murky dawn began to smear across the eastern sky.

The light was tricky, but even so, Race thought he saw a cloud of dust off to his left. That would be, he thought, just about where the horsemen were, if they were riding to cut him off at Lava Pass.

The gray dawn grew brighter, and a few minutes later broad daylight spread over the land. Race looked ahead. The road wound through rough lava beds at this point, and far beyond, he could see the jagged line of Lava Ridge cutting straight across the road. The sharp cleft in Lava Ridge was Lava Pass.

He swung a glance at his backtrail, but there was no one there. He glanced to his left and ahead, but the ground was rough, and horses wouldn't raise a dust on it. If a band of horsemen had ridden ahead of him and holed up at Lava Pass, they had left no tell-tale cloud of dust.

He felt the tension rise in him as the team brought the buckboard closer to the Pass. Doubts crept into his mind. Suppose he had been wrong in his wild guess? A fool thing like stealing two corpses would get

him thrown out of the rangers—and fast.

He tried to shrug that off by remembering that Macklin would probably have him fired anyhow, after what he had done to Macklin's foreman. Still, he wished that he had taken a little time to examine the remains of Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser. Just to make sure.

The buckboard was sweeping around the last turn in the road now. Ahead lay a stretch about a quarter of a mile long, straight to the pass. He whipped the team to a full gallop, eyes sweeping the jumble of rocks.

Then he saw them. Just a glance of a man hurriedly changing his position from one rock to another. A momentary blur of movement.

He loosened his gun in his holster, mindful that he would be using it in a few minutes—just as soon as Judge Breeden bought into the play. The team was at full gallop now, and the mouth of the Pass only yards away. Another instant and the buckboard was rolling through the pass. Now—

FROM THE corner of his eye he saw the flash of the gun, and he flung himself backwards off the seat. He heard the crash of the rifle, and the whine of the lead slug, then he was rolling off the back of the buckboard, hitting the ground at a dead run, his gun lifting as he slammed a shot at the flash of rifle fire.

"Git 'im, you fools! Stop that team!" John Macklin's voice was a roar in the narrow confines of the Pass. Race was running for the protectoin of a big rock. As he neared it, a man loomed behind it, squinting down a rifle barrel. Rae flung himself flat on his face, his own gun hammering at the man. The shot missed, but the slug chipped rock into the man's face. He missed his own shot.

Up ahead, another man had left his rock protection and was racing after the team. Race got a momentary glimpse of the man leaping for he reins, and then guns were hammering at him from three directions. He rolled desperately, coming to his feet, and then sprawling headlong again. But his luck couldn't last. A bullet would tag him soon.

"John Macklin, I've got you covered. Drop your gun, sir!"

Judge Breeden's sonorous old voice

rolled through the Pass. For an instant, sheer surprise stopped the shooting. Race didn't linger. He came to his feet and flung himself behind a small rock.

"What the hell is this?" John Macklin roared. "Breeden, you old fool, I'll have you kicked off the bench!"

"Perhaps. Right now, drop your weapon, sir!" Judge Breeden yelled from his hiding place halfway up the rocky walls.

"The rest of you, come out with your hands high!" Race yelled. "This is a state ranger giving orders."

For a moment there was silence in the Pass, then John Macklin stood up, hands over his head. Sheriff Andrews was next and then Thad Malone. There were two more Rocking M punchers.

"You're under arrest, McGee, ranger or no ranger," Sheriff Andrews blustered. "For stealing two corpses."

"The bodies of Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser are evidence," Race said quietly. "Evidence that those two men were already dead at the time the posse pumped them full of lead when they were supposed to be 'hanging' John Macklin."

Macklin's face went a shade whiter under his tan. Up on the sides of the Pass, old Judge Breeden started his laborious descent to the floor of the pass.

"You got proof of that, McGee?" Macklin asked quietly.

Race nodded. "I'll be able to prove that neither man died from bullet wounds, but from knife wounds. That they were both dead before the first bullet was fired into their bodies."

"Take the Judge, Thad," Macklin said quickly, and then his voice rose to a screech. "The rest of you—kill that damn ranger!"

The hands of all the men were dropping—dropping to hideout guns under their vests. Thad Malone was whirling, his hideout spurting flame at the helpless judge clambering down the steep wall. Race dropped to one knee, his gun rocking upwards. He saw John Macklin's hideout gun flashing into view, knew that he should put his first shot into the man. But the judge—

He swung the muzzle a little and pulled trigger. Thad Malone staggered forward a step. His gun dropped and he coughed, deep in his chest. The next instant, Mack-

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HERE'S LEAD IN YOUR BACK!

"Where the hell is he, Red? I can't see him!"



Turncoat Jimmie Ware had finally pulled out on the killers he'd ridden with for ten years . . . only to discover that a traitor can neither go home, nor back to his killer breed—and must ride the slow trail to hell alone—unwept, unhonored, and unhung!

JIMMIE WARE came abruptly and fully awake, and lay tense and listening in the mesquite thicket, the anxiety of the pursued sharp and cold as ice in him. For a moment he thought he had dreamed the sound; then it came again, not loud in the soft midday quiet, but distinct—a creaking, as of wood chafing wood—or *the protesting of saddle-leather!* The supposition shot through his mind—"Gus and the gang—trailed me!"

Tension whipped to a peak in him. Very slowly, so that his movements would not agitate the brush, he pushed up to a sitting position and drew the heavy Frontier Colt from its holster, readying himself. He hooked his thumb over the hammer, shifting

his gaze from one opening in the brush to the next, expecting to see Gus, or Red, or Big Hugh, or Clete staring through at him. But only sunlit blue sky filled the gaps.

He had a flashing memory of running from the campfire in the dusk three nights ago, their bullets whirring around him. He had thought they would probably condone his killing Indian Charlie; but they would never let him get away if they could help it. He had lived ten years with the gang. He knew too much about them.

The sound ceased, then came again with sudden vigor, and he thought that now they must be snooping around the thicket. Well, they would never get him back. He was going to live a decent life, or he was going to

By **NELSON W. BAKER**

die. He had made up his mind to that. There was a scurry among the dry stems, and he swung the gun in frantic haste, then saw a plump gray woodrat scampering away. The sound came no more, and after a time he let his breath out in gusty relief and lay back again, thinking that his first judgment had been hasty and foolish. He had two full days of traveling behind him, over terrain that had knocked the high heels off his boots and torn his clothes and flesh mercilessly, but would reveal his trail only to the eyes of a clever tracker. Indian Charlie had been the one man in the gang who might have cold-trailed him, and Charlie was dead.

That knowledge brought a feeling of security, and tension ebbed from him; but he was not sleepy. He was tired and hungry, and his body was content to rest; yet he was not disturbed at how clearly he remembered things he most wanted to forget—the day his parents had been burned to death in a San Antone hotel fire, and he had fallen under the care of Uncle Gus Endicott, a tinhorn gambler; the forming of the Endicott gang, and the advent of Indian Charlie, who had drawn them from their gambling and shady dealings into his violent mode of life; the years of growing up on the dodge, the killings, robberies, cattle-rustling, horse-thieving; the drunken violence of the hideout camps; the abuse he had suffered at their hands—especially Indian Charlie's.

It had been hell. Now, at nineteen, he was out of it, thankful that his part in that life had been only tending their horses. Yet his conscience troubled him. He supposed that killing Indian Charlie branded him as one of them. Charlie was a heartless killer, with the worst blood of two races in his veins. He had hated Charlie, but he would never have killed him except to save his own life.

He went carefully back over that last night in camp, clinging to each detail that he believed justified his actions. They were all sitting around a small fire under an overhanging rock, with the brush a dense screen about them, planning how they were going to hold up the Crandall stage the following afternoon. There was to be a forty-thousand-dollar cash payroll aboard the stage.

They were very serious and intent, because there was a bounty on their heads,

and things were getting hot, and they were anxious to pull off the job and get across the Border for a rest.

Charlie was doing most of the talking, as he always did. There was a silence, and Charlie looked at him for a long minute, his black eyes smoldering with something more ominous than reflected fireglow.

Charlie said, his narrow lips moving very little, "I got a hunch the kid's goin' to make a break for it before we pull this job. I seen it comin' a long time."

Jimmie was sitting back in the shadows, and he felt their eyes turn on him; but nobody said a word, and after a minute, Charlie said, "First thing he'll do'll be run to Old McCreedy with a mouthful about us an' what we're plannin'."

Charlie could not have made a shrewder thrust. "Old" McCreedy had been an unrelenting bloodhound on their trail, making it publicly known that his life's ambition was the destruction of the Endicott gang. McCreedy was an old man,—but all the more dangerous for having survived forty years as a United States Marshal.

"We got a price on our heads," Charlie elaborated. "It would make a nice stake for the kid, even if him and McCreedy split."

Gus cleared his throat. "What you gettin' at, Charlie? We ain't heard of McCreedy in weeks."

Charlie said, never taking his eyes off Jimmie, "What do you think I'm gettin' at? I've took care all these years to wipe out our trails. The kid's just been waitin' for a chance to double-cross us. That trail's got to be wiped out too."

NOBODY said a word. Jimmie hadn't expected any of them to defend him. They had never raised hand or voice in his behalf. It was a cooked-up job, of course; he had never once intended double-crossing them; all he wanted was to get away and live a decent life of his own. He saw the speculation, the weighing of his life against forty-thousand dollars, written plainly on their faces, and he knew denial would be useless. He sat very still, his fists clenched, his mouth a tight line. Their eyes turned back to Charlie, waiting.

Fear spun to a dizzy height in Jimmie. He jumped to his feet to run; but Charlie was up with the swiftness of a cougar and

had him gripped tight by the shirt front.

"No you don't kid," Charlie said, and hit him in the face. Stunned, he fell, and Charlie kicked him so hard he rolled into the glowing embers of the campfire. Pain flashed through him, clearing his head. He saw the gleam of Charlie's bowie-knife, and something let go inside him.

He pulled out the rusty Colt they'd let him wear. It wasn't rusty any more, and it had five bullets in its cylinder. He let go at Charlie. Charlie was bending over him with the raised knife, so close that the heavy slug could not have missed. Charlie's mouth opened, and he fell across the fire, blotting out its dim glow.

Jimmie heard Gus curse, and say excitedly, "Don't let him get away!" and a bullet smacked into the edge of the fire. Jimmie jumped up and ran into the brush, and kept running, heading up the steepest slopes, worrying through the densest thickets, until he couldn't hear them following him any more. He knew they would try to track him down, and he had fled toward Cherokee Pass until exhaustion had forced him to rest.

He found himself breathing hard as he thought about it—and then the creaking sound came again, and his eyes widened and searched the brush for the woodrat. It was nowhere in sight, but he supposed that it must be pulling or gnawing at something.

Then, all at once in the quiet air, a human voice started humming, and he flattened his body tight against the ground, his heart in his throat. The voice was low—with a kind of guarded, uneasy quality. It was difficult to determine the direction from which it came; but after a moment he satisfied himself that the singer was stationary.

He crawled cautiously to the edge of the thicket and parted the branches with the gun's long barrel. It had been starless night when he had crawled exhausted into the mesquite thicket, and he had felt secure in the belief that he was miles from habitation. It shocked him now to see the cabin among the cottonwoods not twenty yards away—and the white-haired woman sitting in a rocking-chair on the front porch.

She was dressed in faded blue calico, and she rocked steadily, with a kind of belligerent purpose, propelling the creaking chair with a cane as she hummed. He noticed

that one foot was bandaged, and that her glance kept moving nervously, as if she might be watching for something or someone.

He lay there for a long time, watching her, feeling a kind of dull astonishment that an elderly woman should be here in this wilderness. He was very hungry, and he wondered if he should risk asking her for something to eat. That might be safe; but, if there were a man around, he might ask a lot of questions, and even recognize him as one of the Endicott gang. Still, he thought a man wouldn't allow a place to run down like this one, with its leaning porch supports, withered garden, and broken corral gate.

After a minute or two, he holstered the Colt, gave his flopprimer hat a tug lower over his eyes, and got carefully to his feet. He walked very slowly up to the porch, a lean, longlegged youth, his flannel shirt and blue jeans torn, his deeply-tanned face and hands caked with dusty sweat and scratched by the brush. He stopped by the steps and said quietly, "Howdy."

The old lady stopped rocking and looked at him, and he saw that her eyes were blue and bright. There was a flash of fear across them as she glanced at the Colt dangling against his thigh. Then she looked straight at him again, with a sense of knowing what she saw.

"Well, I declare," she said. "Where did you come from, sonny?"

Her voice was quiet, and not unfriendly, and he said evasively, "I figured maybe I could do some chores for a meal. Then I'll be movin' on."

She studied him for a moment with shrewd inquisitiveness. "You on the dodge?"

He shifted his feet, thinking that now it was coming; but he kept looking straight into her eyes, and said, "I reckon I'm runnin' from everybody. Even myself."

She frowned. "You don't look like a bad one, sonny. And you don't have to tell me anything you don't hanker to."

He was surprised that she thought he didn't look pretty wicked, after all the years he had lived with Gus and the gang; but he was glad. He didn't know what to say, so he kept watching her, and waiting. She puzzled him, with her quiet forthrightness, her straight, good glance; yet he instantly

knew that he liked her more than anyone he had ever known.

"What were you aiming to do?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Go over into Long Grass Valley and get a job, I reckon. I'm good at handlin' horses."

She nodded, rocked gently, her eyes keeping a restless watch beyond him. After a moment, she got up. "Set down on the stoop, sonny. I'll fix you a bite of victuals."

She went into the house, limping a little, and carefully closed the door. Jimmie sat down on the steps, watchful of the brush and the hill that rose beyond the dried-up creek. This was a pretty spot, he thought. It could be fixed up into a nice, comfortable home. He had never had a home, and he wished he could some day have a little place like this. Maybe he could, if he ever got over into the valley away from the gang.

IT SEEMED a long time before the old lady came out. She had a plate heaped with beans, bacon and biscuits, and a tin-cup of hot coffee. Jimmie thought he had never tasted anything so good. While he ate, the old lady rocked in her chair that made the creaking noise, and looked out over the brushland without speaking, but humming softly. Jimmie sensed an uneasiness about her that seemed to match his own wary tenseness. He didn't think it was because of his presence, and he wondered about it.

When he had cleaned off his plate, he said gratefully, "Thanks. I'm ready to do any chores you want done."

She nodded, and he sat there waiting, curling up a brown-paper cigaret and lighting it with his last match.

Presently she tipped her head to one side and looked at him keenly. "No sense in your going way over into Long Grass Valley for work when we need a man here so bad. We could give you good board, and pay you a little something."

He glanced around, wondering whom she had meant by "we," and some of the tension her friendliness had dissipated gripped him again. Her question hung in the silence between them. He thought about the gang, and said, "I might bring you trouble."

"If you want to stay," she said without hesitation, "I'll take a chance."

He looked at her with sharp incredulity, and saw that she meant it. After a minute, he said, "I'll think that over. You got chores you want done?"

"Why, yes," she said, and gave him a sidelong look. "My granddaughter's been off up the canyon since daylight looking for our Sam horse that broke out of the corral yonder. You might go see if you can find them, and then fix that corral gate so's Sam won't wander off hunting green again."

Jimmie hesitated, frowning, then nodded and started for the corral, thinking, "A girl—not too young, neither, or she wouldn't be let off alone like that. Don't want to get mixed up with no girl." He was shyer of girls than of anything else. Girls always complicated matters, and there was a great, anxious urgency in him to get this over so quickly and simply as he could and get on across the pass.

Still frowning, he inspected the broken corral gate, and saw that it would take a little fixing. He would get this other business over with first, he decided, and started up-canyon, reading sign that was easy to follow. The horse, Sam, had a peculiar burr on one of his off shoes that left a small dent in the hard earth, even when the rest of the track was not discernible. The sun was bright, and in many places, he was in the open, with the high, sloping, brush-choked canyon walls on either side of him.

He felt jumpy-nerved, and he hitched his gun forward, dividing his attention between the trail he was following, and keeping a sharp watch around him, never forgetting for a second that he was running away from the gang. He followed Sam's trail for perhaps two miles, noticing several places where small boot-tracks crossed it.

When he found one so fresh he knew the girl must be somewhere very near, he stopped abruptly, his nerve on the edge of failing him. He was standing in a spot well screened by brush, and he remained quiet, hoping he would see her first. A hundred yards up-canyon was a thick clump of willow, with a scattering of lush grass around it, and he thought that must be where Sam had headed.

He moved hesitantly to the edge of the trees, and stood listening and watching in the warm quiet for a few minutes, letting

himself think that if he didn't see the girl, maybe he should just forget about it and go on over the pass. A horse whinnied, very close. He pulled in a quick breath and darted in among the willows. The impatient stomp of a horse's hoof came to him, and the sound of a voice, low-pitched. He cautiously parted the leaves and looked into a small clearing, where a spring trickled from a moss-bank. What he saw froze little icicles in his stomach.

There was the girl, and the horse, Sam—and four other horses, all saddled. His eyes centered with hard concentration upon the four men. Gus Endicott was standing over the girl, his hands on his hips; Red and Big Hugh towered on either side of her small figure; Clete stood a little aside, holding the end of a rope that was around Sam's neck. No one was saying a word, and to Jimmie, the silence was eloquent. They were trying to get something out of the girl; there was no doubt in his mind but that they must be asking if she had seen *him!*

He looked at the girl with closer attention, and saw that she had a tan, pert face, and her black hair was done in two braids. She was dressed in a blue flannel shirt and jeans that had shrunk from many tubbings and showed the solid fullness of her body. She was pretty, and very much afraid; but she was standing up to Gus, and looking him straight in the eye.

Jimmie had never seen a girl like her. His eyes clung to her, and for a moment she stirred such a reckless young heroism in him that he could scarcely restrain himself from charging out and knocking Gus down and gunwhipping the rest; but cool, practiced wisdom held him.

He let the branches slip gently back to screen him, and without taking his eyes off the tableau before him, drew the Colt, speculatively, just to have it handy. He thought how easy it would be to put a slug between Gus's narrow shoulders, but he could never, never do a sneaking trick like that, though he knew any one of those four were capable of it. He looked down at the gun, counting the brass rims of the cartridges in the cylinder as he turned it; he counted only four, and his left hand flew to his belt, feeling around the little leather loops and finding them empty.

His throat went a trifle dry, and he

thought, "Can't take a chance on makin' 'em back down with only four ca'tridges—"

He looked at the girl again, and Gus started talking to her in his careful gambler's voice.

"Come on now, kid," Gus said. "You weren't hidin' in the brush yonder, listenin' to what we said just for fun. You were lookin' for this horse. You know who he belongs to, well as we do—you're maybe kin to him. Now come clean—where is Marshal McCreedy?"

Jimmie breathed a sigh of relief. So it was McCreedy they were after, not him, he thought, and remembered the talk about the Crandal stage holdup that last night around the campfire, in a vague way connecting McCreedy with that. He watched the girl intently, seeing her face go a little paler, as she answered Gus with, "If I did know, I wouldn't tell you. You—you aim to kill him. I heard you say so!"

Gus said threateningly, "You still want to keep on livin'. You better tell us!"

She glared at Gus for a moment, then said with a kind of contemptuous deliberation, "Whatever you aim to do, start now, because I won't ever tell you a thing."

Gus just stood there, looking at her, caught in his own trap. Red scowled, and said, "Don't fool around with her. We're wastin' time."

Jimmie brought the gun up slowly, leveling it at Gus, and knowing he would never let any of them lay a hand on a girl with that much courage. Gus didn't move, but after a minute said, "All right, kid, we'll find McCreedy anyway. This horse of his is bound to go home sometime. Keep that rope on him a while, Clete, and let him get fed up with it; then we'll turn him loose and follow him. Better slip a loop on the kid, too, Red; she's stayin' with us."

As Red and Big Hugh slipped a rope loop down over the girl's head and drew it taught about her waist, Jimmie had a difficult moment of indecision—whether to yell at them to step away from her and throw their hands up, or to wait and allow what he had just overheard to fall into an understandable pattern in his mind.

He lowered the gun, thinking about the uneasy watchfulness of the lady back at the cabin. If the gang were after McCreedy, maybe he was hiding there. Maybe the old lady was Mrs. McCreedy!

But he reckoned from what he had heard about Marshal McCreedy that he would never hide from anyone. His mind conjured up an unpleasant picture of what might happen if the gang found the cabin, what *would* happen—to the old lady and this girl—if they had the money from the Crandal stage and were ready to ride across the Border.

HE STARTED backing away, very cautiously, keeping the gun leveled and not taking his eyes off them until he couldn't see them any more through the willows. Then he turned and slipped down the canyon, and when he felt he was far enough away so that they wouldn't hear him, he started to run. A big stone rolled under his feet and made a terrible racket bouncing down into the creek-bed. He thought, "Lordy—maybe they heard that," and he ran faster.

He came, breathless and red-faced, to the cabin, and ran up to the door, which opened suddenly and disclosed the old lady, holding a sawed-off shotgun locked against her side. She lowered it when she recognized him.

"Mercy on us!" she exclaimed. "What—?"

Jimmie gasped, "Give me that gun. You got to give me it, quick—"

He reached, and she stepped back, lifting the muzzle slightly, her wide eyes studying his face.

She shook her head. "Not till you tell me what's happening, sonny."

He was in the midst of telling her when he saw a tall, gaunt figure loom in the semi-darkness behind her. He saw a ghostly, bearded face, staring, feverish eyes—and in each hand the man held a large revolver.

"Step aside, mother," the man said authoritatively. "I'll handle 'em."

His voice trailed off, and he collapsed upon the floor.

"Dad!" the old lady cried, and dropped beside him. She laid the shotgun down and looked up. "He's fainted. Help me get him back to bed, sonny." Her eyes were big, but there was no panic in her voice.

Jimmie took him under the arms, and the old lady took his feet, and they got him back into bed. Jimmie noticed a blood-soaked bandage about his chest. He looked across the bed at the old lady. "Somebody shot him?"

She nodded, pouring water into a wash basin. "The Endicott gang. Two nights ago. He was riding along the road home from town just before dark, and saw them holding up the Crandal stage. He'd been after them so long, he just couldn't keep out of it." Her voice broke a little. "And only last week he'd retired, and we'd come back to fix up our old place here."

Jimmie looked down at the angular, bearded face, and knew he was looking at Marshal McCreedy—"Old McCreedy." Even lying pale and insensible, there was something of the wounded lion about the man—a fine, strong quality in the face. That quality was there in the old lady's face, too.

He made a swift mental comparison between these faces and those of the gang, and something that had been malleable inside him solidified, and he saw his path clearly-defined before him.

He looked up. "Well, they're up yonder, and they're comin' after him. Your granddaughter wouldn't give him away, but they're goin' to follow the horse. From here on, I'm takin' over. You look after him."

There was a quality in his tone that brought no protest. She looked at him with a kind of pride and nodded obediently, and he went to where he had noticed a shell-belt hanging on the wall and took the .45 caliber cartridges out and put them in his own belt, his fingers moving with calm haste. He filled the empty chamber in his gun, picking up the shotgun and breaking it to make sure it was loaded. As he went out, the old lady said softly, "God protect you, sonny."

He walked up the canyon trail with a careful deliberation, the shotgun resting in the crook of his left arm. His stomach felt tight and hard, but there was no fear in him, no crawling anxiety as there had been when he had held the gang's horses numberless times behind some bank or off in the brush, waiting while they pulled a job. He wondered about that, but kept his attention sharply on what he was doing.

After a while, he moved off the trail and worked his way through the brush along the canyon side. He came to a bare spot and hesitated, studying the landscape, then started across.

He turned his head, and something like

the kick of a mule hit him, and the sun went a thousand times brighter, then was blotted out. An instant later, the crash of a shot whipped across the canyon, but Jimmie didn't hear it.

IT WAS hard, coming back from oblivion, to pick up where consciousness had left him. When Jimmie became fully aware again of the urgency of his course, it was harder still to force himself up from the brush and stone of the canyon floor. He stood for a minute, swaying uncertainly, his fingers feeling the numb, stiff spot above his temple, where a bullet had furrowed the scalp deeply and left clotted blood. His head ached, and he knew that they must have bushwhacked him, and that if the blood was so dry, he must have been here a spell.

Anxiety gripped him. He looked around and saw the shotgun and picked it up. He swung down-canyon at a crazy, unsteady trot, stumbling, catching himself, driven by a force stronger than any he had every felt in his life. He did not try to understand it. He just knew that those people—that fine old man and woman, and the girl—suddenly mattered to him more than anything else in the world. If anything had happened to them, he was going to kill Gus and Red, and Big Hugh, and Clete, when and where he found them, and without compunction.

There was the sharp crack of a shot somewhere ahead, and then another, and he circled off through the brush, coming within sight of the cabin almost at the spot in the mesquite thicket where he had slept last night. Another shot sounded, very close, and he saw a man crouching behind a boulder off to one side of the cabin.

The man's back was partly turned toward him, but he knew that it was Clete. Clete had a gun in his hand, and a wisp of smoke was curling from the barrel. He poked the gun around the rock and fired, and Jimmie saw chips fly from the windowsill of the cabin. A shot spit back from the window, and ricocheted off the rocks, and Clete ducked back, grinning.

Jimmie slowly raised the shotgun, centering its muzzles upon a square of Clete's plaid shirt between his shoulder-blades. The distance was not thirty yards. He tightened his finger on the trigger. Then abruptly he lowered the gun. Even in his

anger, he could not shoot a man in the back, not even one of the gang. He saw Clete slipping his gun around the rock again, and he locked the shotgun against his side and called, "Drop it, Clete—I got you!"

Clete must have known his voice. His mind must have flashed a warning vision of Indian Charlie sprawling across the fire with Jimmie's bullet in his heart, for Clete made a scrambling turn to get flat on his stomach, bringing his gun up simultaneously.

Jimmie didn't wait. He was protecting himself now, and a heartbeat before Clete threw his shot, he let go with the right barrel of the shotgun. He heard the whine of Clete's bullet, very near; and he saw Clete's hat fly off, and his head flop down and stay quiet. He stared for a moment, waiting, not letting himself think about what he had done, then looked toward the cabin. There was no sound from it, and he could see nothing of Gus or the rest of the gang.

He wondered if anyone had seen him and he knew he had got Clete. Interminable minutes passed, and then a shot cracked from somewhere on the far side of the cabin. He decided that was where they must be with the girl, if they still had her, and he figured that Gus had left Clete here to draw fire, while he and the others had worked past the cabin to cut off any retreat. Gus, always the careful gambler, was playing it safe.

Jimmie made a quick decision. He stepped out of the brush and started to run toward the cabin, risking a shot from within if they didn't recognize him, counting on the fact that Gus and all the others *were* on the far side of the cabin. He had nearly reached the front porch when the old lady's voice cut out at him in a sharp whisper.

"Hurry, sonny. Get inside quick before they see you. They're behind rocks out back! Thank God they didn't get you."

He saw her holding the door open a crack, waiting for him. He shook his head and kept going. "Thanks, but they're *goin'* to see me," he said.

"Don't be a plumb fool," she snapped back at him. "They've got Sally up there—they'll kill you both!"

He didn't want to frighten her any more by telling her he knew Gus would never leave until he had wiped them all out.

He sidled along the wall, said, "They can't *all* hide behind a woman."

At a corner, he peered cautiously around between the crossed timbers. For thirty yards the ground sloped gently downward, with no cover until it reached some large boulders among dense brush.

"What you goin' to do?" the old lady whispered anxiously.

Before he had made up his mind to answer, another shot came from the boulders and thunked into a window frame. Gus's voice floated up in its wake. "All right in there. We're givin' you one more chance. If McCreedy don't show up in five minutes, you'll never see the girl alive again. I'm timin' you from now."

The girl's voice rose clearly, "No! No, Granmaw. They'll kill him—" It was choked off, as though by a violent hand.

Jimmie raised his voice, holding it level, "Listen, Gus. This is the kid—Jimmie—talkin'. I'm inside with a sawed-off," he lied, "if you're thinkin' of breakin' in. Old McCreedy is in here dyin' from your gunshot. You've got your loot. Let the girl go and beat it, while you got a chance. You're just wastin' valuable time."

There was a silence. Then Gus said with a little laugh, "The kid—sidin' against his own blood. Charlie said you'd run to McCreedy."

"I don't claim a drop of your blood," Jimmie called back. "You goin' to let the girl come back, and then beat it?"

"So McCreedy's dyin'," Gus said craftily. "In that case, kid, *you* come on down with your hands in the air, and the girl goes back to granmaw."

Jimmie's mind worked furiously. After a minute, he called back, "You got to give me a few minutes to think that over."

"Five minutes," Gus answered flatly.

Jimmie snapped at the old lady, "Get back and watch for 'em to come out in the open, then use that rifle."

He ran back into the mesquite thicket where Clete lay behind the rock. Trying to keep from looking at what the saw-off had done, he knelt and stripped the man's blood-smeared shirt off, put it on over his own. He got Clete's hat and gun-belt and put them on. The hat was too big. As he ran, bent over, down the creek bed, he stuffed dry grass inside the sweatband. The sawed-off was a nuisance, and only had

one shell left in it; but he hung onto it.

When he was around the first turn, he heard the stamp of a horse's hoof on the bank above him.

He climbed up, and saw four animals huddled together in the brush, and he had a rushing memory of the times he had held their horses ready for a quick getaway. This time, he thought, there would be no getaway.

He moved past the horses, holding the sawed-off low, so that it would be hidden by the brush. He was not trying to be too careful of his approach. He was counting on Clete's hat and shirt enabling him to catch them off guard. His heart was pumping hard, and sweat stung the bloody furrow along the side of his head. He knew that the end—or the beginning—of his trail lay just ahead.

And then he saw them. Gus was hunkered on his heels, peering around a boulder toward the cabin. The girl was seated with her back against the rock, her long legs stretched out; she still had the rope around her, and her face was very white and set. A few yards away, Big Hugh leaned against a rock, a rifle across his arm, and to Gus's right, Red lay flat on his stomach, the barrel of his revolver resting in the crotch of a bush.

They were only twenty yards away, and totally unaware of his presence. He raised the sawed-off, and opened his mouth to warn them—

A GUST of wind whipped down the canyon and swept the hat from his head. It sailed a few yards, dropped to the top of a bush. The movement instantly brought the heads of the three men around.

Gus yelled, "It's the kid! Lookout boy! He's got a gun!" He sprang close to the girl, bringing his gun up.

His first chance gone, Jimmie deliberately swung the shotgun on Big Hugh, who had his rifle halfway in line, and let go. Hugh seemed suddenly to be flattened against the rock, and then his body slid down in a heap. Jimmie tossed the shotgun aside and drew his own and Clete's guns from their holsters.

Gus and Red were both firing now. A bullet knocked Jimmie's legs from under him. He went down shooting with both guns at Red, who was trying to get around

the rock. Red made it, and Jimmie deplored his lack of the shotgun. Something red hot seared up his arm and jerked his left shoulder violently, and his left hand wouldn't hold a gun any more.

He heard Gus shout exultantly, "Winged him. Get in there, Red. Finish him off!"

Jimmie lay half-hidden in the brush, his eyes, bright and pain-filled, shifting between Gus and the rock where Red had disappeared. He held the big Colt in his right hand, its muzzle aimed toward Gus, waiting for the moment when the man might move far enough away from the girl to give him a clear shot.

Gus, the careful gambler, always playing it safe, he thought, and a sneer twisted his mouth. Red would be around the rock any moment now, running in for the kill.

There was a shot, not close by, and Red, still on the other side of the rock, screamed shrilly.

"God. They got me, shootin' from—cabin—"

Red came thrashing around the rock, weaving desperately, his arms extended before him, as though he were groping in the dark. He made a few yards, then pitched forward on his face and lay still.

Gus, always the cool, quiet gambler, suddenly turned into a raging, cursing madman. He flung an arm about the girl's waist, lifted her as a shield before him, and bore down upon Jimmie, his gun flaming.

"You dirty, double-crossin' little devil," Gus screamed. "I'll shoot the guts out of you! I'll—"

Jimmie tried desperately to roll away, but his left side seemed paralyzed, the stout roots of the brush held him. Only the girl's violent struggling kept Gus's shots from going home.

White, speechless with fear, she suddenly sank her teeth into Gus's arm. With a curse, Gus flung her from him, stumbling, trying to right himself. Before he could swing his gun into line, Jimmie very deliberately brought the Colt up and pulled the trigger.

The bullet struck Gus just above the belt-buckle.

Jimmie closed his eyes, and turned away. He felt sick and tired. It was wonderful to lie and rest. He let the Colt slip from his fingers. Somewhere in the distance he

seemed to hear a girl's high-pitched voice screaming, "Granma, oh, Granma! Maybe he's dyin'! Come quick!"

But then her face was hovering mistily above him, and he thought it was a fine, pretty face.

Jimmie grabbed a handful of brush and started to pull himself up, and his mind cleared a little.

He said, "I can make it. Thanks, granma. You got Red."

They got him inside and onto a bed in the cool, clean-smelling dimness.

"If you was to look into the saddle-packs on them four horses out in the brush," he said weakly, "you might find the money they stole off the Crandall."

"All that can wait," she said, and the old lady said suddenly, "Pa's awake! You hear that, Pa? He says maybe the money's in their saddle-bags. Now you lay straight back down, Pa. You two can talk this over when you get better."

Jimmie saw her pushing the great, lean man gently, firmly back onto his pillow. McCreedy sighed and submitted, then turned his head toward Jimmie. Their eyes met across the room, and McCreedy smiled, and fluttered an eyelid.

"Ma told me about you, son," he said. "You did a brave thing. We want you to stay with us, help us fix the old place up, and keep it up. We'll hang our guns up together, and there'll be no more killin'. Just plain, beautiful, simple livin'. Amen! What do you say, son? I can't go back to sleep 'til I know."

Old McCreedy's voice was very soft, but Jimmie heard every word.

He asked incredulously, "You mean—I got a home here, if I want it?"

McCreedy said, "You sure have, son. You see, I knew your Dad. He was a fine, straight man."

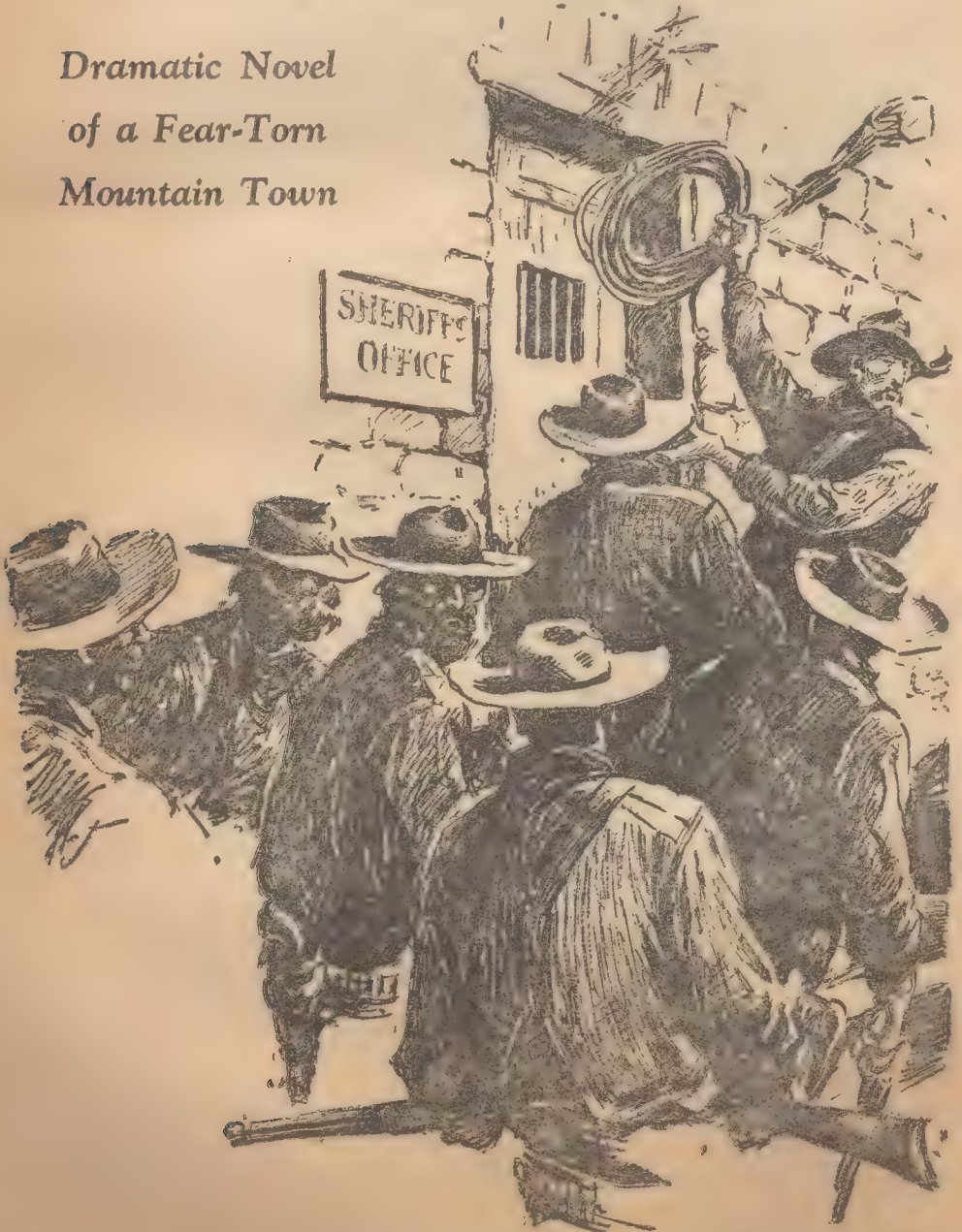
Jimmie saw the anxious, waiting faces of the girl and the old lady. Suddenly the great thing that he had dreamed about for so many long hard years become a bright, real picture ahead. A home, fine, decent people.

He said quickly, before his throat filled up, "Thanks. I—I was goin' to ask if I couldn't stay awhile," and turned his head away, so that they couldn't see the tears rolling down his cheeks.

● ROUND UP THOSE

Seething hatred made a coward gun down a man all Saddle Rock Creek feared. . . . And fear again made the town track down the unknown bushwhacker. . . . Jeff Rider, who feared neither the murdered man nor the town, was singled out by fate to show those crazed men the folly of their terror—even if it took the sight of his broken body swinging from a hangtree limb! . . .

*Dramatic Novel
of a Fear-Torn
Mountain Town*



BACK-SHOOT REBELS!

Chapter I

KILLER IN THE JACKPINES

SHORT AND BULKY, a shabby figure in gray, pale of skin, hair and eyes, Lude Kenshaw slid back the bolt of his rifle for the sixth time to look at the high-powered cartridge in the firing chamber. He was hunched down in the low pines and the big blue rocks on the

east rim of Jackpine Canyon. Most of his attention was to the south, on the old trail a thousand feet below, but he was constantly looking around, sharp eyes probing everything far and near.

Ten minutes ago a devilish magpie had come from somewhere, unseen until it had

By **TOM ROAN**

"Hold it, boys! For God's sake,
listen to me a minute!"



squawked overhead, making itself a flash of blue and white-striped tail feathers in the air. With a startled, half-choked squawk of his own, Kenshaw had bucked half to his feet, as scared as a flushed sage hen.

The rifle had slipped and dropped from his big square hands. Damning all things that flew and came upon a man like that, he had settled back. For the next five or six minutes his breath had been hard and fast, sweat popped out as large as buckshot on his forehead, his heart going ninety miles an hour and sounding like a hammering trap-drum in his broad chest.

He was quiet again, heart normal, hands as steady as steady could be, his breath gentle. Hell, he was safe up here, this still Saturday afternoon with the warm mid-August sun slow-stealing down over the tall, shining peaks of the Sword Blades. No one could come up here. No one could reach the rim for at least a mile in either direction. The high, ledgeless walls made it impossible for a wild goat to go up or down.

His tall, fast-traveling bay was behind him, standing quietly and completely hidden in a thicket of jackpines. There would be only one shot, because he was one of the best shots in the Tall Country of the Rockies, one of the best grizzly hunters that ever tossed a rifle to his shoulder. It took cold-steel nerves, standing and facing a charging grizzly coming in on the run to kill or die.

After the shot he would go back to his horse and hit the saddle leather, and then be gone, unseen, leaving death below. A lot of half-crazy yelling and cursing would go on if old Bob Tanner's six or eight Circle Star cow hands had decided to quit Saddle Rock Creek and go home with him after his midmorning fist and gun-bust fight in town.

Bob Tanner had always been a brutal, utterly heartless bully, sober. He was a raging, blood-hungry madman when there were a few drinks in his long and broad belly. In his younger days he had been a Chicago and Kansas City prize fighter and wrestler. One long and lean old Charley Weatherspoon—a cattle buyer who for years had been coming to the Tall Country every spring and fall to buy—had known him in his prime, and had told a number of people that Bob Tanner would have been a

really great fighter if he had been able to hold his warhorse temper.

He had lost the most of his fights and mat matches on glaring fouls, and had finally been barred from all of it for turning on a referee to break his jaw and scatter his teeth on the canvas-covered floor one night in Kansas City.

Knocking men's teeth out and scarring them for life was a red-eyed passion not to be curbed in Bob Tanner. Lude Kenshaw was one of the forty or more men in the tall country who knew. He never shaved or otherwise looked into a mirror without being reminded of him and his great mauls of fists. He could never blow his nose or touch it without thinking of that crowing and strutting bully. Rarely could he eat without remembering Bully Bob Tanner.

All the time in the world would never erase those deep, dark scars on Lude Kenshaw's round good-natured face. Time would never reshape and straighten that once-battered and mauled and kicked nose, looking for six years now like a big, ugly-formed, ugly-blue and red yam, so tender in winter he had to keep it covered and hidden behind a velvet-lined flap of calfskin with the hair left on.

And like the nose and the scars, time would never replace his upper and lower front teeth or take the ache out of his hands, his big wrists, ankles and knees where he was stomped with high-heeled boots. Each time it was going to rain or snow those joints started to throb. He was not a good hand with a rope any more, and his knees hurt too much for long rides in a saddle.

Lude Kenshaw hated Bob Tanner, hated his guts, his liver and his lights. He hated him from the ends of his toes to the top of his bushy black head, the shadow he cast on the ground. Sometimes when the aches were on him, he cursed the sun and the heavens for casting the shadow or looking down on him.

And yet Lude Kenshaw was smart. That beating had been six years ago in Tom Hardy's Little Red Mule Saloon, just below the bank, the express, telegraph and post office on the west side of Saddle Rock Creek's crooked and narrow main street. The mauling that raw winter night with a blizzard blowing outside had put him in bed for more than a month and had left him on crutches and stout walking sticks for

better than six weeks after that. Bob Tanner had laughed about it, and he'd laughed in dried-up Sheriff Ben Murdock's face when the old man told him that it was right and proper for him to pay the doctor bill. Lude Kenshaw had never said a word, had made no threats.

Lude Kenshaw had gone further than that. Ben Murdock had arrested the giant the next time he had come galloping into town. Lude Kenshaw had refused to appear in court against him. He had let things cool, grow utterly cold, half-forgotten. This afternoon those scars, those teeth and all these aches would be paid for—in full! In addition, there would be a thousand dollars on the side, money that would be slipped to him for doing a job that was going to be a pleasure, a pleasure he had long known he would one day take.

"Only I hope I don't kill 'im straight out." He had told himself that over and over, a thousand times in the past, six years of the deadly venom of hate ever-growing in his heart, body and soul. "I want to hit 'im low in the guts, my bullet to cut them all to hell, so much no doctor can tie them.

"I want 'im to take days to die, a-rot an' a-wash inside, the fever flamin' in his low, mean brain, his body afire from head to tail until he burns to a shell an' dies like a mad-dog on his bed. The crack of a gun, a little stab of pain, an' a man like him dyin' as quick as a wink ain't enough for me, not the way I hurt an' look. Damn 'im, I want 'im to suffer.

"Maybe he'll get to know how it feels with me an' a lot of others he's crippled up. All I asked that night was for him to let me take his hoss crost the street an' put 'im in a stall of my public stables to keep 'im from standin' there at the hitchrack an' freezin' from the wind an' snow 'cause it was fifty below."

Only one person, one man—not even his own wife—had ever heard Lude Kenshaw express himself like that. That had been thick-chested, gray-mustached and great-paunched old Oliver Twink, head man—and some said out and out owner—of the Tall Country Land, Cattle, Sheep & Horse Combine whose six big office rooms were above the Saddle Rock Creek National Bank. Oliver Twink had been his friend.

Oliver Twink had loaned him money for his doctor bills in Saddle Rock Creek. He

had three times more given him money to see the better doctors in Battle Bend, the big railroad town sixty miles east of Saddle Rock Creek.

Today, almost immediately after the excitement of the terrific fight in Hardy's Little Red Mule Saloon, Twink had come down to the stables to see him. There had been a quiet talk in the rear end of the big hallway. A little deal had been made, one that would flame high and probably rock the Tall Country from end to end. It would, at last, mean the end of Bully Bob, and no chance of one Lude Kenshaw being accused of the shooting.

A NOISE up the canyon startled him. He twisted himself around, tremblingly parted a fringe of weeds, and looked out. An old man in dingy brown was coming down the canyon in a rattle-trap buggy drawn by a pair of shaggy gray horses.

It was Old Doc Jim Jenny, He had been up the canyon to see Cal Grace, probably, after that mean horse had turned a hula-han with him a few days ago and was now heading back for Saddle Rock Creek. Kenshaw watched him creep on until he had turned a bend in the trail. A bulge in the canyon wall hid him then, and Kenshaw settled back once more.

He heard a clatter of hoofs ten minutes later, coming up the canyon, the riders still out of sight beyond the bulge. At once a tingling, trembling sensation beset him, running from his toes to the top of his head, beginning at the fingertips and racing up his arms in a strange, half-hot, half-icy chill that spread all over him, leaving the ends of his fingers and toes numb.

Lude Kenshaw had never killed a man. His teeth chattered. He bit his lip, remembering that he had felt just like this when he had come up on his first grizzly, facing her and a cub at less than ninety yards. He had steadied himself then, dropping her with a ball through the head just as she started to charge. A man would be easier, especially when he could see nothing, smell nothing and hear nothing until the crack of the rifle filled his ears and a bullet tore through him.

And now riders were coming, Kenshaw's long, slender-barreled rifle was steady in place. A horse's gray head was first, then the shoulders, then the man in the saddle,

and Bully Bob Tanner was down there. Around the bulge trailed six of his riders, about forty feet behind. Kenshaw gave them only a glance, eyes fixed on Tanner, his big, wide gray shirt-front, his squared shoulders, a hat almost as large as a Mexican sombrero on the back of his head, dark bangs combed straight down his forehead, the ends making a hard line just above the eyebrows.

This was it. This was death. A great coolness had come over the man on the rim, and his every nerve was steady. Tanner seemed to be asking for it. His big gray had slowed to a walk. Tanner had a quart bottle in his right hand. He lifted it, rocking himself back in his big saddle to take a long drink. The sights of the rifle had already found his belly. He was just about to lower the bottle when the crash came, the noise spreading in all directions, rocking back and forth across the canyon, fleeing up and down it and spreading out across the hills.

Bob Tanner looked surprised, still sitting his saddle, the bottle half-lowered. His horse had come to a quiet halt, the men behind him quickly pulling up, each to stare this way and that, not one of them able to locate where the sound of the shot had come from or why it had come.

Kenshaw was bitten now by a cold, sickly gripping in the pit of his stomach. He thought he had missed, missed at this close range. He worked the bolt, throwing out the empty shell and sliding another cartridge in place. His cheek came down again, the sights once more fitted themselves on that broad, gray-shirted belly.

The second crash of the rifle seemed louder and sharper than the first. Again it sent splintering echoes fleeing back and forth from wall to wall of the canyon, rocking up and down it then flinging themselves all of a sudden out across the rims.

"Damn. I hit 'im the first time, too."

The killer's voice was a whisper. Even as he had pulled the trigger for his second shot, squeezing it back until the hammer fell, he had seen big Bob tilting to his left in the saddle. Now he was going out of the saddle, going fast, his men staring, mouths open, eyes popping. He hit ground on his head and shoulders, spurred right heel giving his big gray a furious, blood-bringing rake and making the horse snort

and take a quick jump away from him.

"Good Gawd, look!" yelled a cowboy. "Mr. Tanner's been shot off his hoss!"

"Naw!" yelled another. "Can't be!"

"Can't be, hell!" The first cowboy was swinging out of his saddle. "Ride fast back down the trail an' fetch Doc Jenny! He can't be gone on far in his ol' rattle-trap. Bring 'im back here fast!"

Lude Kenshaw waited to hear no more. There was nothing left for him to see. Still keeping flat to the ground, he wiggled and twisted himself back. When he was sure it was safe enough he got to his feet, the noise of hoofs below beating back down the trail, a cowboy going hard to overtake Doc Jenny. As white-faced as a ghost now, Kenshaw raced for his horse, keeping himself in a low crouch under the trees.

Chapter II

BLOOD ON THE MOON

OLD DOC Jim Jenny brought the news into Saddle Rock Creek. A man who never hurried his shaggy grays unless it seemed an absolute matter of life or death, he came back into town at his same old lazyhorse pace, not a trace of excitement in his wrinkled face. With his horses at a walk he swayed and squeaked on down the street. In the middle of it he made a turn to the left, bumped across the low sidewalk, and pulled up in front of the old court house and jail.

Stepping out of the buggy, he took time for a fresh chaw of tobacco, and then moved slowly forward to the long, wide porch. He crossed it as if he had all afternoon and night. In the big hallway he turned through a doorway to his right and was in the sheriff's office. Old Ben Murdock was there, straight ahead of him behind his spur-tracked desk, a half-floppy gray hat on the back of his head, red-booted feet cocked above him.

"Bully Bob Tanner's dead." Jim Jenny's announcement was as calm as a mere statement about the weather. Not another word came out of him until he had moved on and slowly gouged himself into a chair at the end of the desk to the sheriff's left.

"Shot, a couple of hours ago from the east rim of Jackpine Canyon. Hit twice. First shot woulda killed 'im in time, but

he would have suffered long an' hard, the way the bullet musta cut his innards all to pieces. Second bullet saved 'im all that. Busted the heart wide-open, judgin' from the looks of the wound, the way the bullet went through."

"Damn!" The sheriff let his run-over heels come down with a bang, his rusty rowels a dull clatter on the hard-planked floor. "This is bad, Doc. Damn bad!"

"There was nothin' I could do when they called me back." Jenny bent for the cuspidor, spat, then hooked it closer between the dusty toes of his once-fine dress boots. "I had the boys rope the body across the saddle of his gray, an' they headed on for the Circle Star. Two of his boys wanted to wheel back to town an' come a-hellin' to you. I talked 'em out of it."

"This is bad, *bad*." Ben Murdock was staring straight ahead, face pale, lips having gone purple. "I allus said an' thought that Young Jeff Rider was the most sensible an' coolest of the whole cantankerous Rider breed. Damnit, he whipped Bob this mornin' in the Red Mule. They tell me he knocked him down an' a-windin' six or seven times in a row, then Bob got up an' whammed 'im over the head with a gun."

"Was gonna put the boots to his face an' limbs, but Tom Hardy jumped the bar an' grabbed 'im. Took Tom, they said, an' four Circle Star men to hold him off. I reckon Young Jeff mighta shot 'im then 'an there, if he'd had a gun on his hip. But, hell, he so seldom wags one."

"Yeah, I know." Jim Jenny had slumped back in his chair, wearily crossing his thin old legs. "I sewed up Jeff's scalp for 'im when they fetched 'im crost the street to my office. An' I see," his eyes narrowed for a second into pale blue streaks, "that you're already gettin' your rope stretched to hang 'im."

"Hell, no, last thing I'd wanta do!" The sheriff turned his head and glared at him. "That's just what I wouldn't want, I swear! An' to tell yuh the truth, Doc, there ain't too many men in the Tall Country that the law, sneaky an' damn mean it can be, who'd hang anybody for shootin' the guts outa Bully Bob Tanner."

"He's beat up too many men in the Tall Country, gettin' 'em down to kick 'em in the face, in the back over the kidneys, stompin' their hands, arms, ankles an'

knees. Aimin' to leave a cripple behind ever'time. Look at Andy Miller's face an' the way he walks when he comes to town. Look at Art Stevens, Pinky Clark, Joe Jackson, Dude Winters, Bud Snell, an'— Well, hell, there's just too many to name!"

"I know all about Bob Tanner," nodded the doctor. "I've been trying to fix up the wrecks he's made around her for more'n twenty years. Some awful human wrecks, too. An' now," he cleared his throat with a gentle hacking, "Bob's dead, Hell-bound already if theres' such a place, an' the Tall Country ain't lost a lot by his goin'. But here you are, gettin' out your rope to hang Young Jeff Rider, Ben."

"Young Jeff did have a mighty fine new rifle hangin' on the saddle of his tall black hoss." Murdock was staring straight ahead and thoughtfully rubbing his chin. He headed outa town for Lone Valley quite a spell before Bob an' his men left, an' Lone's only three or four miles east of Jackpine Canyon in most places. Less'n that at the head of the valley where the houses stand."

"Yeah, an' I've thought of all that," nodded the doctor. "He headed for his daddy's old Boxed J R, then got to smoulderin' an' stewin', his head' an the side of his face hurtin' like blazes. Bob did get one fast kick to the jaw before they snatched 'im back."

"So Jeff makes 'imself a left turn, goes up an' over to the rim of the canyon, an' just piles down to wait for Bob. Bob comes. Jeff plugs 'im twice with his rifle. Bob falls off his horse. He died as he lived, with a bottle in his hand. We had to pry it loose. One of them things called a cadaveric spasm."

"Well, now," he shrugged and leaned for the cuspidor, "that's what some jackass prosecutin' lawyer'll get up an' say to make a case for the rest of the pack an' maybe get his cut on what they can get outa Old Jeff. Ever'thing cut an' dried, though the bottle won't be mentioned. There's enough evidence to hang Jeff or send him to the pen for life. All Old Jeff's Lone Valley, his horses an' cows his money in the bank, won't save Young Jeff."

"Most people in this country'll be glad Bob's dead, Doc," frowned the sheriff.

"I'm tellin' yuh, he was a hated man."

"Double-barreled an' triple-barreled hate, yeah," nodded the doctor. "Still, though,

he's got some stout backin' up 'round the head of Jackpine. Enough to start a damn hot war. Bob just did enough here and there to give some people help. Helpin' the Judson woman when she was havin' the kid last winter and old Man Judson got froze up in the Winged H crossover. Went all that way and back just to get Doc Barnes.

"An' take old Sam Kirkpatrick. The time his kid got the croup an' was near dyin' before Bob Tanner got through with some medicine. An' lots more, Ben. Lots more. Ain't a defense lawyer who'd have a one of those on the jury. There's the general feelin' of the country, itself, too. If Young Jeff had just yanked a smoke-stick in the Red Mule after he was hit with a gun an' kicked, if he'd blowed hell an' gut an' brain outa Bob right there you'd been a-wastin' your time arrestin' 'im.

"But I'll tell you this, Ben Murdock: This Montana-Wyomin' line country don't cuddle to men who shoot from the bushes. So," he waved his hands emptily, "I'm just wonderin' when you're goin' up to the Boxed J R to bring Young Jeff in?"

"Maybe in the next hour or so." Murdock took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead as if it was getting hot in the room. "I don't know. All I see in this thing is blood on the moon."

THE ONE man who should have heard about it was entirely ignorant of it all. No news of the killing reached the Boxed J R until after the long purple shadows had ceased to crawl across the valley. The moon was just coming up high enough to cast a fan-shaped spread of light behind the rugged Calfskin Range, when bald and squint-eyed Hank Butler came galloping in, finding everybody at the supper table in the old lean-to.

"Bully Bob Tanner was killed this afternoon!" His voice was sharp, full of excitement, gray eyes popping. "On his way back to the Circle Star with some of his riders. Shot from the east rim of Jackpine, they say, with a high-power. Hit twice!"

"Naw! Ain't possible!"

Gaunt and long Old Jeff Rider had lifted his head with a startled jerk. He glanced quickly to his left, at his buxom Martha sitting there at the head of the table, her face suddenly white.

Knives, spoons and forks were dropping now from the eight cowboys and the two bronc twisters ranged along either side of the long, stout-planked old table. Everybody had heard of Young Jeff's fight in the Little Red Mule Saloon. Every pair of eyes were at once on the tall, square-shouldered and brown-haired figure at the foot of the table.

For some reason, Young Jeff Rider's face had gone pale with his mother's sudden blanching. The blood had quickly left his lips. The bandage on his head was like a white turban, right jaw a big, ugly-dark lump that had been making it difficult for him to eat his supper. His eyes now met his father's over the length of the table and seemed startling blue in the glare of the two big swinging lamps hanging from the sloping, hand-hewn rafters overhead.

"Whole town's stirrin' like a knocked-down hornet's nest." Floppy old white hat in hand, Butler was trying to tell the rest of it, a little man holding the floor and the center of all attention.

"Now that he's gone yuh'd think Gawd had been shot, the way they're howlin' an' blowin' their heads off in Saddle Rock Crick. The Elwoods, the Chesters an' the Liggetts come poppin' in. Right behind 'em as if trailin' come six Circle Star fellas, led by Big Sneed Parker. Yuh know how mean an' plain lousy he can be when sober, a devil like Bully Bob when drunk. I allus thought Bully Bob was afraid of 'im. Big Sneed could allus handle 'im in his wildest drunks. He—"

"Just a second or two, Hank." Old Jeff Rider had lifted his gnarled left hand, eyes still on Young Jeff's face. "I wanta ax a question, son. Didja shoot 'im, lay for 'im on yore way home?"

"Did you need to ask that, Dad? If you did, it's *no*!" The rest of it was so straightforward no one could have doubted. "I didn't see Bully Bob Tanner after the fight. He backed me behind the table in the southeast corner of the Red Mule, his hand in my collar and his long left arm holding me off. Everybody knows he's got arms as long and strong as a gorilla's, and I couldn't get loose."

"An—then, son?"

"He made a wild swing-over with his six-shooter in his right hand, hitting me on the head." A faint smile streaked across

Young Jeff's face. "I went down like a dead cow, I guess. I don't remember him kicking me on the jaw. When I opened my eyes I was in Doc Jenny's rear room, on his table getting my head sewed up. I was so bloody he had to send down the street to Rubenstein's to get me this gray shirt and an undershirt. I couldn't come home and let Mom see me as things were."

"You didn't go back 'cross the street, son?" His mother asked the question, looking at him intently. "Didn't see Bob Tanner agin?"

"No, Mom." He smiled at her. "I was pretty weak. Don't know yet where all that blood came from. Doc Jim made me lie on his old black leather couch and rest for two or three hours. Old Ben Murdock came in a couple of times, wanting to arrest Tanner if I'd promise to see it all the way in court before Judge Lige Pender—"

"An' yuh told 'im?" cut in his father, "What?"

"That the Riders didn't do things like that." Young Jeff grinned, some of the color returning to his face and lips. "I was doing all right for our side, Dad, until he got that big hand in my collar and whammed me with that long Colt."

"Good, son." It was the elder Rider's turn to grin. "Yuh never go pickin' for trouble, I know. If yuh did I'd take a latigo to yore back, twenty-six that yuh are. An'," he nodded, face grim again, "I know what yuh say is the truth. I never knowed any Rider to dry-gulch a man or otherwise whang down on 'im with a gun when he wasn't lookin' his man square in the eye. Much obliged, Hank!" He glanced up at Butler. "I reckon yuh can go ahead with the rest of it now."

"I've nigh told it all, I reckon." Butler shrugged, looking like a man who had been thrown off a subject and could not find his way back to it. "There was just talk an' low cussin'—the most of the crowd jammin' up in the Red Mule. But—but," his eyes brightened, "there was some strong hints about the new rifle Young Jeff got outa the express office this mornin'. They say the bullets in Bully Bob liked a lot to bein' as big round as a pencil, where they went in 'im."

"So far, Hank," Young Jeff had sat back in his chair, "there are no cartridges for the new gun. I ordered them, but they

didn't get here with the gun, and there were none in Race Pelly's hardware store to fit. I tried him, the only place in town where shells can be bought. But what are all of you trying to do?" He was suddenly leaning forward, looking at them from one end of the table to the other. "Are you trying to pin this killing on me?"

"We ain't, no!" half-snapped Old Jeff. "Just makin' shore, son, that somebody else won't have a chance. For years now there's been no love lost between the old J R an' the Circle Star. Sam's gone for the Elwoods, the Chesters an' the Liggetts. They let Bully Bob run 'em, boss even the men they hired an' sometimes didn't pay. He—

"Lis'en!" The gnarled left hand shot up again, eyes slowly widening, the room suddenly dead quiet. "Hop out to the front porch, Hank, an' see who'n hell that is a-comin' up the valley. Sounds like a whole roundup gang."

"It's worse, maybe." Hank Butler had scooted through the wide and long old living room, and was back within thirty seconds. "It's a whole golly-whopper crowd of men, an' I think—good as I can tell in the light of the moon—the man in the lead on a big white hoss is ol' Sheriff Ben Murdock. Wonder what he wants?"

The sheriff was answering that question for himself a few minutes later. Old Jeff Rider had lifted his hand, a signal for everybody to remain quietly seated at the table. Murdock was soon coming in, leaving his crowd at the hitchrack except for one man trailing him, and that man was Lude Kenshaw, owner of the public stables in Saddle Rock Creek. Murdock stalked right on through the living room, pausing in the doorway to saw off his battered hat, and speak with a hard-forced little grin.

"Good evenin', folks. Howdy, in special for yuh, Martha!"

"Howdy, Ben! Set down an' have a bite!" Old Jeff Rider had become as tense as a compressed spring, but his voice was pleasant as he waved an ever-free right hand at the table. "Yuh an' Lude. There's plenty left, an' Martha can soon batch up enough for the rest of that crowd of fellas I hear you've got behind yuh."

"I didn't come this time to eat, Jeff." A sour note had entered the sheriff's tone.

"An' right off the anvil, I want yuh to know that I didn't fetch all that gang outside 'cause I was expectin' trouble with yuh an' yore boys. They're to be Young Jeff's protection as we go back to town an' atter we get there.

"Young Jeff," he was slumping on toward the foot of the table, Lude Kenshaw still hugging the doorway, "I most nigh got down on my knees two times today, begging yuh to let me 'rest Bob Tanner an' lock 'im up, keepin' 'im there until he was leastwise sober 'fore lettin' Oliver Twink come bail 'im out. He allus sends for Oliver. If I'd done that, Bob might still be alive an'—"

"Get on with the rest of it, Ben!" Old Jeff Rider had kicked back his chair and surged to his feet. "Hank Butler's told us about Bully Bob. From the start I wanted to ax what it was brung yuh here. Now *whut!*"

"Take 'er easy, Jeff!" The sheriff's voice was flat as he shot him a glance, then swung back to Young Jeff. "Son, Big Sneed Parker, backed by the Liggetts, an' the Elwoods, went to that rattle-mouth prosecutin' attorney we got in town. He swore out a warrant. Judge Lige Pender signed it. There wasn't nothin' left for me but to come here an' take yuh back to town."

"Hell, no!" Old Jeff Rider hit the table with his fist, jarring every dish and rattling the silverware. "Damnit, Ben, I'm counted fairly well-fixed, an' I've got enough friends to make Young Jeff's bond up to fifty or—maybe a hundred thousand! So I guess yuh better trot on back to town."

"But not to me for murder, yuh can't." The sheriff looked at him with a cold, helpless expression in his ever-tired face. "If bond there'll be it's got to be set an' approved by Lige Pender. Just try to help me, Jeff. Yuh know I think the world of Young Jeff. An'—an' 'fore I forget it," he added hastily, "I'd like to have me a look at that new rifle yuh got outa the express office today, Young Jeff. I hope yuh got it handy!"

"Sure thing!" For some reason Young Jeff Rider was smiling. "It's hanging in the deer horn rack just above Lude Kenshaw's head. Reach up there and bring it to him, Lude!"

Chapter III

HANG 'IM HIGH!

SADDLE ROCK Creek was howling for a bloody murder when they brought him in. Backed by the Elwoods, the Chesters and Liggetts, Big Sneed Parker had just about placed himself in full-charge of the town. More and more riders had come storming in, their horses sweat-lathered. Mobs had pulled up in front of Tom Hardy's Little Red Mule. Others had poured on across the street to Mike Sullivan's Old Corral.

Still more were down the street below the Old Corral, wetting their whistles in Sandy Fowler's Yukon Totem Pole. When scouts set to watch the trail came to report that old Ben Murdock was bringing his prisoner in without handcuffs, the growls and cursings could be heard from one end of the street to the other, and as usual Big Sneed Parker was making the most of the noise.

"Damn 'im," he yelled, "he once brought me in the full sixty miles from Battle Bend with my wrists locked together an' chained to a buggy seat, an' all I'd done was to lam a fool cowboy over the head with my six-gun! This can't be right! Fair play to all! Ben Murdock's right now tryin' to work 'im outa that killin'!"

He failed to tell them that the cowboy had lingered between life and death for more than a week or that he had been given a cracked skull for refusing to quit a job with old Dude Winters to come to work for the Circle Star, but there were men here to agree with him that Ben Murdock was unfair. Ben Murdock had handcuffed many of them—among the men now backing Sneed Parker's play. He had handcuffed them when they were drunk and wanting to fight everything in sight—or had killed in cold blood and were hunting some other foe to down while the blood was hot.

At the Boxed J R it had been almost a fight to get Old Jeff Rider to remain at the ranch and keep his men there. Young Jeff had never been locked up in a jail, and the old man had thought it only decent and proper to go as far as the door of the lock-up with him.

"An' that's what we ain't wantin'," the sheriff had argued. "Yo'll only get yoreself

in a jam, Jeff. It'd be the same with any of yore men. Some fool'll jump 'em, spar-rin' 'em into a fight, an' there'll be blood before the night's done."

Young Jeff had helped him put up his argument. His mother had finally taken sides with him and the sheriff, a strong woman who would remain strong through this thing, come what would. In the end Old Jeff had listened to reason.

"But I'll be there at the crack of dawn in the mornin'!" he had snarled. "Yo'll hear my ol' Black Lightnin' hoofs comin' a-ringin' down the street. I ain't desertin' my boy."

"Yuh stay to hell outa Saddle Rock Crick!" the sheriff half-howled, "tonight an' in the mornin'! Damn it, it'll probably be worse by mornin' than tonight. I want yuh and all yore friends to keep away. I don't want no general fight bustin' loose on my hands, Jeff. Let me handle things in my own way, please!"

Twelve men rode behind him and his prisoner now, enough to make a fair show of a fight in case the worst came. Still he was none too cock-sure. Not more than four of them would really hang into a fight and stick to it until they had won or died trying. The rest would start quick and and quit quick, for they were mostly men of the town, not used to getting out and having their bellies and feet held to the fire in a real gun-bust.

"I brought the backdoor keys," he growled when they were six hundred yards above the head of the street. "We'll try slippin' 'im in at the back. Once inside I'll hold yuh, Jeff, come what she may. If we see she's goin' against us, we'll sneak it for Battle Bend."

He had taken a good look at the new rifle back at the ranch. One minute's examination of the weapon had told him enough. The rifle—now hanging to his saddle for a mighty good reason of his own—had never been fired and was still full of the cosmoline put there by its makers, danged fine evidence in favor of Young Jeff. But Ben Murdock had not said a word about it, a wise old owl keeping his thoughts to himself.

Followed by the quiet Lude Kenshaw, and leaving the others to go on and make a bluff of it as far as the head of the street, Murdock now swung to the left, dropping

into a ravine fringed with low, thick pines with Young Jeff Rider beside him. The rest of the crowd moved on, one small man on a big white horse, a tall man on a black beside him as if the pair were leading the crowd. It had the desired effect after a few minutes. Men seeing them in the moonlight from the distance were quickly fooled. A wild yell went up from in front of the Little Red Mule:

"Here he comes with 'im, boys!"

"Let 'im come!" instantly bawled another voice. "Tonight's the night we'll show 'im what comes to a fella low-gutted an' coward enough to shoot another'n from the bushes!"

"Hank Butler was right, yeah," growled the sheriff. "Gawd's dead! That was Ira Tucker, allus the big hawg, big mouth at ever' doin's. What yuh say I bet yuh a dollar agin a plugged nickel that Big Sneed Parker knocks his long nose off 'fore midnight?"

"Wouldn't bet, know I'd lose." Rider tried to smile. "Big Sneed'll try to take Bob Tanner's place now as the great, over-bearing bully of the Tall Country. I'll lay a good odd on that."

"Like yuh, I don't bet on sure-shots, Jeff." The sheriff looked at him with a twinkle in his eye in the moonlight. "Hell, ever'body'll know that 'fore they get Bully Bob's coffin in the ground."

They were behind the jail a short time later, yells and threats raging in the street as the riders sent on as a decoy reached the head of it. Murdock immediately turned the horses over to Lude Kenshaw to quietly hurry them on in the shadows and get them into his stables.

He then unlocked the door, and stepped inside, letting Rider follow him, the darkness swallowing them until he had struck a match to light an old lantern hanging from the ceiling of the jail corridor. Rider had taken the keys out of the lock. He closed the door and locked it. Just as he turned in the lantern's light a wild yell lifted from beyond a cell window on the north side of the jail.

"We've been fooled, boys! We've been fooled! Ben Murdock slipped 'im in at the backside of the jailhouse! Young Jeff's inside now!"

"Shove on, Jeff, an' get in the dark!" hissed the sheriff, taking down the lantern

to blow it out. "That's that damn Ira Tucker agin. Wonder how he got to the side of the jailhouse so fast? Musta suspected somethin' like this. But," he shrugged as he lifted the lantern's globe and blew out the light with a quick puff, "we'll hold our ground."

Yells seemed to answer him, cat-calls and cursings. A glance out a dark cell window a few minutes later showed that the whole town seemed to be pouring forward to surround the jail—a mob on the hunt for blood.

BY MIDNIGHT it was many times wilder and meaner than Ben Murdock had even seen Saddle Rock Creek in all his years as sheriff. More and more riders had stormed into town as if they would never cease coming. Groups of others were more quiet but grim-faced and stoutly armed, ready for the worst and going to meet it as all-out fighting men. These were friends of the Riders, cold-sober almost to the last man and sensible enough to avoid the main street.

The news had gone the rounds, a single, near-flying rider taking it to one ranch, and the owner there sending as many as six or seven of his men scattering it on like startled birds on the wing. The Riders had many friends, even among the sheepmen ranging their flocks high in the hills.

Old Jeff Rider had never refused a sheepman the right to cross the Boxed J R when he was pushing his herd for distant grasslands. In return no sheepman had ever refused Old Jeff the right to cross his range with a herd of cattle or horses. Many sheepman had sat at his table and slept in his beds. He was welcome at any sheep camp's fireside—a man who had "lived and let live."

"Doesn't look a bit good," the sheriff had reported more than two hours before midnight after spending half his time watching from the window of both the lower floor and the huge court room upstairs, and now and then slipping up to the broad, flat room for a general look-around. "Yore friends keep a-comin', Jeff. Old Dude Winters an' his crowd's here. So is Andy Miller, Joe Jackson, Pinky Clark, Bud Snell an' Art Stevens, an' last of all Sheep Kelly with six or seven of his toughest herders at his heels. They hush the dark. In

a little while they're gone in the night."

"You can't mean," surprise had filled Young Jeff Rider's face, "that these blow-hards scare them right back out of town!"

"Nope, worse'n that, even," had growled the sheriff. "I've taken me some good an' far looks from this high old roof. They're playin' a mean game, here an' achin' for the real hell to bust loose. They come, yeah, they slip away, yeah, lettin' the Tanner side think they're scared. I heard big-mouthed Ira Tucker an' Sneed Parker laughin' 'bout it near the porch below me.

"Them two trouble-makers don't know what I know, Jeff. That pine thicket an' them big ravines on the slopes of the hump above the head of the street are bein' jammed full of men an' guns. It's the same on that big-timbered ridge east of us, men an' ready guns waitin', hopin' for it.

"They've planted spies, too, on the lower roofs here an' there. Once them spies flash a signal that it seems to be goin' too hard on me, the real hell's gonna bust loose. That street out there will be turned to a river of blood."

"Listen, Uncle Ben!" Young Jeff Rider said. "Don't lie to me. When did you sneak out a call for help?"

"So yuh peg me, huh?" the sheriff had grunted. "Well, now, just 'tween us two, I didn't send out no call. Honest! I did sorter drop a hint to a couple of fellas I could trust, sayin' I thought it was goin' to be a tough Saturday night on me an' I might find myself in a real jam, an' Young Jeff Rider hangin' to the limb of a cottonwood tree, his body shot full of holes before mornin'.

"That was some little time 'fore I started up Lone Valley atter yuh. Them fellas mighta passed the word all along the line. Still, though, I think just 'twix yuh an' me, not countin' much help from town folks, that we could hold out agin all hell, come what would, son."

Now he was on the roof again, worried sick body and soul, but he was not scared. From up here he could see everything. He spotted the faint glow of a cigarette in some one's cupped hand. Over on the ridge to the east it looked as mean and still under the trees as death.

It was something else entirely here. The crowd had grown too infernally quiet, had drawn back and was now coming forward

again, a seething mass of humanity. Six men were carrying the long, thick log that had been wrenched from the forked posts of the hitchracks in front of Tom Hardy's Little Red Mule Saloon.

That heavy log meant business. With it they were going to batter down the front doors. Other men carried crowbars, wrecking bars, chisels and hammers. One had a bolt-cutter, the most of it from the old blacksmith shop. Back in the crowd, watching all, sure of enough men between them and the jail to stop bullets, loomed Big Sneed Parker and the loud Ira Tucker. Bitten by a quick idea, Ben Murdock was suddenly calling down to the mob, startling it to a shuffling halt.

"Hold, now, boys!" His call reached to every ear and he was stooped yet to keep himself out of sight and not invite a bullet. "This is Ben Murdock! I want just one minute to say somethin', then yuh can come on with yore plans if yuh wanta!"

"Yuh can't talk 'em out of it, Murdock!" That was from big-mouthed Ira Tucker. "The boys have made up their minds!"

"*The boys!*" mocked the sheriff. "That, of course, don't mean yuh an' Big Sneed! Yuh two are just watchin' the show! Takin' no part! 'The boys' are doin' it! What'n hell are yuh right now tryin' to do, plant evidence that yo're only an innocent bystander? Gettin' set to wire-work yorself out of it when the others have to go to the pen for murder for tonight's work. *Think it over, men!*"

"Yuh can go to hell, Murdock!" yelled up one of the men carrying the log. "Sneed an' Ira are with us, an' we know what we're gonna do!"

"Then," bawled the sheriff, suddenly standing boldly on the lip of the roof to face them, "why bust down doors when yuh can make it easy on yoreselves! Lis'en, why not take the keys, unlock the doors, an' *walk in like men!*"

"**T**AKE the keys an'—an' walk in?" A puzzled muttering came up to him. The men with the heavy log lowered it, rocked back on their heels and stared upward, shocked. "What'n hell do yuh mean, Ben?"

"Just what I said." He was looking down, grim-faced, a man in a deadly dangerous game trying to play a last trump

card. "Big Sneed Parker and big-mouthed Ira Tucker have got yuh into this mess. Now they hang back an' talk about 'the boys'—meanin' yuh pore damn fools. All right, here's my ticket an' how I stand:

"Let Sneed an' Ira shuck their guns, no hideouts 'cause I'll find 'em. Let this mob move back to the sidewalk. I'll open the door an' let Sneed an' Ira come inside. I'll show 'em somethin', somethin' all yuh fellas better know about 'fore yuh start tearin' down my jailhouse doors. I'll show 'em. They can walk right out. Then yuh boys can pick two more. I'll let 'em in, *show 'em, an' let 'em out.*"

"Yuh can still pick men atter that, two or four or six more. Men yuh know are *sensible* an' *trustful* who'll come out two by two an' tell yuh only the Gawd's truth. If they tell yuh to go ahead, then I swear to yuh I'll either hand right over the keys or unlock the doors an' walk straight out. What say, men?"

"It's a trick!" yelled Ira Tucker. "He wants me an' Sneed locked up in that fool jail!"

"By Gawd, Ira, I don't believe that." A big, long-nosed, rusty-haired cowboy by the name of Sam Smith had turned on him. "Ben Murdock's word is good, allus has been, allus will be with me. I sorter think yuh an' Sneed oughta take 'im up. That damn log, anyhow, is gonna be hard to swing. Don't the rest of yuh fellas think so?"

It was sudden showdown—two crowing and strutting bullies trapped into something they had never once thought about. Murdock had said just enough to set the rest of the mob thinking what these two were doing, and these two were now trying to back out. They began working their way toward the rear. Old Ben Murdock laughed at them from the roof, goaded them and the crowd down there as well.

"Yeah, 'Let George do it!'" he yelled, laughing as he yelled, a man scared but holding on. "Them two'd run yuh into it, up to the eyes, lettin' yuh drink the fire an' shed the blood, an' then let yuh shoulder all the blame. Send 'em in! Yuh know my word ain't never failed yuh, enemy or friend. Yuh know either one of them big-mouthed squirts would tell a low-down, bald-faced lie on credit when he could get spot cash for the truth. Damn it, be fair

to yourselves. Shuck the guns off of 'em if they won't shuck 'em, an' send 'em in!"

It was almost a fight. Parker and Tucker wheeled back to back, threatening, trying to bluff their way out. It was no use. They had been too concerned with their own safety and were deep in the crowd. Suddenly—angry mutterings lifting, hard faces pushing forward, leering into their faces—they were wilting. A thin, sharp yelp came from big-mouthed Ira Tucker.

"Hell, we'll go in!"

"Shore, of—of course!" barked Big Sneed. "We'll show the old devil we ain't sacred of nothin'! If—if he pulls a fast one on us an' locks us up yuh boys can take us out when yuh take Young Jeff!"

"That's a deal!" agreed the hook-nosed Sam Smith. "But I tell yuh agin that Murdock's word's good, bad as I sometimes hate the ol' devil when he locks me up!"

Seeing that he had them coming his way, Murdock was already hurrying below. He went down the skylight ladder, then raced on down the stairs as fast as his legs would carry him. He was out of breath when he reached the dark office of the jail where the shades were carefully drawn to cover the iron-barred windows.

"Got to have a light now, Jeff!" he gasped. "Got to work fast, too! Big Sneed an' Ira are comin' in."

A few minutes later, faces sickly yellow with fear but trying to yet look big and bold, Parker and Tucker were let in, the mob outside keeping a respectful distance. Ira came first, as if Big Sneed had given him a push. Murdock closed the door, shot the heavy bolts, and as good as shooed them on into the jail office. They stopped just inside, blinking in the light, then staring.

"There sets yore man," intoned the sheriff, waving his right hand toward his prisoner calmly sitting behind the desk. "I've gone out an' dragged in a lot of fellas in my time on this job, but I don't think I'd relish goin' in on Jeff here, not like he's fixed for a fight now."

"Shotguns!" muttered Tucker. "Rifles an' six-shooters! Hell, Ben, yo've give 'im all the fightin' tools in jail to pile on that desk. Look at the shotgun shells, the rifle an' sixgun cartridges, Sneed!"

"I'm lookin'!" sneered the big, dark Sneed. "I see other things, too. Look at the top of that big iron safe in the corner."

He waved his left hand. "More guns, more ammunition, Ira!"

"More guns, yeah," nodded the sheriff, voice thoroughly gentle now. "An' that, fellas, is where I'll make my stand, unless, of course, yuh damn fools try to get sensible an' go on home where you belong. I don't wanta have to blow that hallway full of dead out there."

"They—they can still get at yuh, Ben," stammered Tucker, bucking back his shoulders and squaring them, not going to be talked out of a last threat. "They can fire the damn roof over yore head. Been some talk of that a'ready. We—"

"Shut yore mouth!" snapped Parker. "I—I think I'll get outa here. Kinda hot with all these doors an' windows closed so tight."

"Go ahead, fellas!" ordered the sheriff, hard-holding his smile. "I'll open the door for yuh, just like yuh come in. Just have the others knock when they come."

"Oh, go to hell!" snorted Parker, heading back for the hallway. "We'll 'tend to our business. Yuh mind yore own!"

Chapter IV

COLD CARTRIDGE OF DEATH

"**M**AYBE I've read about such things. Maybe I've heard about 'em, but I never saw anything like it happen."

The most surprised man in Saddle Rock Creek seemed to be huge, heavy-jowled Oliver Twink, sitting like an overgrown bull with his white mustache in the wide and leather-padded red swivel chair behind his broad mahogany desk.

Nine-thirty in the morning had come. Luke Kenshaw sat across the desk from him, slumped forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, his hands nervously turning his big hat between his wide-spread legs. He frowned several times, watching Twink sit there toying with his hands, carefully fitting his finger and thumb-tips of one hand against the other, a habit it seemed when he just wanted to bore the devil out of somebody as he kept them waiting.

"Not a shot, not a drop of blood," he was going on, taking time to stare up at the ceiling, eyes bright, one of those half-silly smiles on his fat face. "Except, of course, when it came to a fist fight or two

in each of the saloons where the tail-ends of the mob gathered. Most of them blaming Big Sneed and that loud Ira. Ira, I'm told, got his big nose whammed around unmercifully in the Red Mule. Big Sneed, yes. Already taking the place of Bully Bob, I suppose."

Lude Kenshaw had something else in mind and wanted to get at it as quickly as possible. He had seen everything, had heard everything. He had seen Big Sneed Parker and Ira Tucker go reluctantly inside the jail, and he had seen them come out, both too excited for many words. Others in pairs had gone in after that. No pair had remained more than five minutes, hustling themselves away from the crowd quickly on the pretense of a drink.

"It's suicide, boys." Old Buck Liggett had spoken his mind, coming out with the straight, hard truth with Sam Smith beside him. "Bustin' them doors down will be like tearin' a hornet's nest apart with yore nose an' teeth, only it'll be bullets an' buckshot yo'll have to face here. They're loaded to the guts an' just waitin'!"

"That's right, exact!" Smith had agreed. "Old Ben's set an' just a-waitin' for yuh. Hell, he even offered us the keys. When we wouldn't take 'em he unbarred the doors. All yuh have to do is walk in an' start yore dyin', fellas. I ain't that big a fool. Me'n Buck's goin' for a couple of stout, long drinks."

"Speakin' of Bully Bob, now, Oliver," Lude Kenshaw was trying to get back to the important subject, "didn't yuh an' me have a little sort of an agreement? Somethin' about a thousan' dollars swappin' hands as soon as the job was done?"

"We did," nodded Twink. "There's a question, however, I'd like to ask you. You fired twice. What did you do with the first cartridge you ejected from the rifle, Lude?"

"Well, I—uh—think," Kenshaw's face colored, "it flew over the rim when I yanked the bolt back for the second shot."

"You *think*, but don't *know*!" Oliver Twink was staring at him with a cold, set stare. "That empty shell's apt to hang somebody yet, Lude!"

"Me?" Kenshaw winced, face paling. He licked his lips, quickly darting his tongue in and out, then he was sitting back in his chair, the lazy slump having left

his body. "How the hell an' why?"

"It comes from your rifle, Lude. There's not another like it in the country, not another weapon that would chamber such a cartridge. I hope Ben Murdock doesn't find that shell. You've got to find it—and find it quick. I know where you hid the rifle when you came back to town. Fact is, I changed your hiding place for it last night. So don't go out and fire a shot and bring me the empty shell, and say it was one of the two fired from the rim.

"When you get that empty shell and bring it to me, then I'll tell you where to find that high-power, and," he shrugged, "a thousand dollars will still be passed between my hand and yours. That clear?"

"Cripes, Oliver," Kenshaw surged nervously to his feet, "yuh make it plain an' damn hard on a man! Yuh know that rim'll be a dangerous place to go messin' round!"

"The shell's still more dangerous!" Twink stabbed a fat forefinger at him. "To tell you straight out, you've licked too many boots in Saddle Rock Creek, hoping to curry favors and pick up a few dollars here and there. Ben Murdock's was the wrong pair for the few fees you could get from him for serving papers now and then.

"Look, you *fool*," he stabbed the forefinger again, "can't you remember loaning old Ben that rifle last fall when he went on a deer hunt? He killed two six-point bucks and downed a moose with it. The moment he finds that empty shell he'll know who killed Bob Tanner. And don't think he won't go over the ground where the shots were fired with eyes as keen as an eagle's. He's a lot smarter than you think."

"Where's my rifle, Oliver?" Kenshaw had suddenly clamped on his hat and was leaning forward, pale eyes two streaks of fury, his square hands bloodless as he gripped the edge of the desk. "I'll get it an' ditch it tonight, then I'll go to Ben Murdock with a big squawk that somebody's stole it outa my saddle room."

"I'll keep that rifle for a time, Lude." For some reason the smug smile on Oliver Twink's face was the smile of a cat playing with a mouse. "Until you get that empty shell. It's safe. In fact," he reached for his box of extra-long, extra-fat cigars on the desk, "it's locked up with the moth balls and my winter clothing in a closet in

my bedroom. I alone have the key. Smart of me, wasn't it?"

Lude Kenshaw had no answer for him. Scared, sick at his stomach, he turned and walked out, heading for the stairway that would take him to the sidewalk.

ON THE sidewalk he stopped as if something had struck him a swift blow straight to the pit of that cold, empty stomach. He sucked in his breath with a harsh intaking sound. His eyes widened, popping for a moment as if about to bulge from their sockets.

They narrowed in another second and seemed to become mere streaks of newly melted lead. He let out his breath then, a tingling sensation flooding him from head to toe, and the breath came slowly, as if he were afraid some one might hear it and read his thoughts.

Old Ben Murdock, again mounted on his white horse, was coming up the street from the direction of the public stables. Kenshaw had to blink and stare a couple of times to make sure that was Young Jeff Rider on that tall, fast-stepping black to the sheriff's right. What a way to take a prisoner out for an airing when he was charged with murder, and had only narrowly escaped a lynching!

Young Jeff Rider had a couple of heavy cartridge belts around him and a long, shining-new silver-plated Colt at either hip. He had his new rifle hung to his saddle also, a good sign that his cartridges had come in on the stage due from Battle Bend at six o'clock last night, but delayed until seven o'clock.

Murdock and Rider were racking up the street at a fairly good clip, Jeff an easy figure in his bog saddle, the sheriff looking a little cramped here and there. Keeping to the other side of the street each spoke and waved his hand. Kenshaw lifted a jerky right hand, flapping it. He opened his mouth to say "Good mornin'!" but no word came out because his throat was so dry.

The pair were gone and out of sight a minute after that, bearing to their left to strike the old wagon and cattle trail that leading them to the timbered mouth of Jackpine Canyon. Somebody might have told him that old Doc Jim Jenny had gone up that trail thirty-five or forty minutes ago in his buggy.

But it was not really necessary for anybody to tell Lude Kenshaw anything. He had seen enough to know the rest of it. Something was up. It could mean only one thing. Old Murdock and young Rider were heading for the place where Bully Bob Tanner had been killed. They were going to go over the ground. Something had to prevent that. They might be lucky enough to find that empty shell in the rocks on the rim or in the rocks below.

"Hell," he muttered, "they could even be in cahoots with this business Oliver Twink's pullin'! Might be workin' deliberate to make me the goat. Men have done things like that on me before."

A thought of his old .405 grizzly rifle, locked up down there in his saddle room, now came swimming through his head. He turned, stumbled, swore, and hastily started for the public stables. His face, he knew, had become inhumanly pale, heart and breath fast.

Suddenly it came to him that he was moving at a trot that was threatening to break into a wild run. Only by a great power of will did he pull himself down, mouth puckering. Despite missing teeth he could still whistle. As he whistled his thoughts were afire.

Tricked! He wanted to shout the one word clear to the sky, wanted everybody in the whole town to know how mean he was being treated. Even now his knees ached. He quit whistling and pushed his tongue forward, feeling the snags of his broken teeth. *Damn!* This was hell! He had felt so nice and free only yesterday morning about this time.

Chapter V

DAMN' POETIC GUN-JUSTICE!

"THIS IS the place. There's the blood on the ground where he fell."

Either young Rider and the sheriff had been slow or Doc Jim Jenny had broken his record by whipping up his shaggy horses here and there. He was at the place when the two horsemen came galloping up and swung quickly out of their saddles.

"I figure they musta come from right up about there." Jenny was pointing to the rim. "Judgin' by the way the bullets went through 'im."

"He was a good shot, whoever he was," nodded the sheriff, thoughtfully. "Knowed just where his slugs would strike."

"Lots of men," nodded the doctor in return, "in this country can shoot like that. It's said that Young Jeff, here, can knock a runnin' jack-rabbit's ears off with a good six-shooter at sixty or seventy yards, an' a bob-cat's eye out at nigh two hundred with a rifle."

"Not that I'm sayin' Jeff done it," he hastily added.

"Oh, hell, yes!" agreed the sheriff. "Yo'd swear he didn't if yuh knowed he did. . . . Who's that comin' down the trail like a house afire?"

"Linda Fayett, the one-time Bully Bob's step-daughter," Jenny answered, the eyes of all three of them now on the tall, well-knit girl with auburn hair galloping toward them on a high-strung sorrel—her buck-skin riding skirt fluttering in the wind, green blouse flashing in the morning sunlight. "Somethin' oughta tell me she ain't bustin' her heart out or cryin' her eyes away because he's gone. Bob's never been anything but mean to her an' Grace, her mammy."

"Wait, Jeff!" half-barked the sheriff. "Where'n hell yuh goin'?"

"If you don't know, wait," half-growled, half-chucked the doctor. "Maybe I get around these tall hills an' far places more'n you do; maybe I see more, hear more an' learn more from the seat of my old buggy by just seein', hearin' an' keepin' my mouth shut. Watch 'em."

A leap had carried Young Jeff Rider back in his saddle, spurs raking the black into a snorting jump and a wild run. It was as if he could see nothing, hear nothing and think of nothing but that pretty, blue-eyed girl pounding down the trail. Now she was standing in her stirrups and leaning forward over her saddle horn, spurring her sorrel and slapping him with the ends of her long reins to close the distance between herself and Rider as quickly as possible.

"Gawda'mighty," growled the sheriff, "am I asleep an' dreamin', drunk as a boiled owl, or just plain seein' things, Doc?"

"I never figured them two would ever so much as nod to each other, bad as Old Jeff hated Bully Bob an' the whole Circle Star outfit, an' how bad Bully Bob hated Old Jeff. Look at 'em!"

"I am," nodded the doctor. "Don't cost nothin', an', anyhow, it's the duty of a man of my profession to observe, note and diagnose the manners of men and women. Hell, Ben, that ain't nothin' but love."

"Damn it, look! He's kissin' the hell outa her!"

Young Jeff Rider and Linda Fayette had met and had quickly swung their horses close together. Both were now leaning from their saddles to get even closer. Rider had taken the girl in his arms. Murdock and Jenny heard her cry out to him as soon as she could catch her breath.

"I didn't know, until this morning, Jeff!" she sobbed. "About—about them arrestin' you and putting you in jail, the mob and all that!"

"Bully Bob, now," intoned the doctor, "woulda beat her maybe to death with his mean Spanish quirt if he'd ever suspected a thing goin' to happen like this. Ruled her mother from the start with an iron heel an' a merciless hand."

"Linda was scared half to death of him, an' she hated 'im, but she stuck to her dead daddy's Circle Star for the sake of her mother, fearin' to leave, fearin' he'd blame Grace an' maybe kill her for her goin'. She's been seein' Young Jeff a long time, but it's only been in secret. His daddy an' mammy know about it. They're for the girl an' her mammy, teeth an' toe."

"Let's keep this to ourselves, Doc." Murdock gripped his arm. "The judge an' that prosecutor in town will grab it as another motive for Young Jeff to wanta kill Bob. He—"

Before he could finish, a powerful bullet had clanked against his right side and tore on in deflected flight across the canyon with a fierce scream in the air, the report of a heavy rifle on the east rim coming down as a great crash, the noise rocketing and echoing.

"Good Gawd, Ben!" gasped the doctor. "You're hit!"

TURNING his head to look back at the two men behind him, Young Jeff Rider had moved just in time to see the flash of the rifle and the old sheriff stagger a pace forward and slump to the ground. Old Jim Jenny's mind must have been as quick as a trigger after that. He jumped to the sheriff and caught him by the left wrist.

There was a deep little dry wash only a yard from the west side of the trail. Jenny yanked the sheriff to it, rolled him quickly down the steep slope, and followed him like a diving bullfrog just as a second crash sounded from the rim.

"Get in the clear!" yelled Rider, immediately bolting with the girl toward the high east wall to take shelter close against it. "That's the killer who shot Bob Tanner!"

A shot tore at them before they reached it, a bullet raking the top rim of the cantle of his saddle, splashing a ragged rip through the polished leather. He raced on, the girl slightly ahead of him to his left, and reached the wall before another shot could come.

"He—he killed poor old Uncle Ben!" gasped the girl. "I saw him fall! I think Doc Jenny's hit, too!"

"Maybe, maybe not!" Rider was trying to look up. "Right now I can't wait to see. I've got to get to the rim, and it's a mile or more to go in either direction. That means two before I can cut back."

"No, Jeff, I know a way up." The girl pointed northward along the wall. "Discovered it by accident only a month ago when I was chasing one of our colts up the canyon. He wheeled into a wall of brush and low trees, and went up. But that killer's waiting up there. He'll kill you!"

"He won't remain there long, honey," he told her, trying to look up again. "I don't expect to get much more than a glimpse of him—if we can get that. Show me that place, and you stay below hugging the wall. Don't get yourself killed."

She led the way, and it was not far, no more than six hundred yards before she was forcing her horse into a wall of brush and bushy pines. After a few yards she was swinging to her left, in behind a thief wall of rock, a deep, trough-like break rising steeply ahead.

"Wait, now, wait!" he hissed. "I'll find the rest of it! Stay here, out of the danger, Linda!"

"I'm going where you go, Jeff." She turned her head, face set with determination. "Always! besides, can't you see that I have a rifle on my saddle? Your fight is my fight. Don't argue with a woman!"

He could not grab her sorrel by the tail and pull him back. The only thing he could do was to follow her. In a little while they

were at the top, up this narrow way it had taken a year-old colt to find. Now he could swing up beside her.

"Keep behind, at least!" he said. "And out of line!"

"The lioness always leads the charge, Jeff." She was actually smiling, so confounded cool after the first burst of excitement she was startling. "She's the shock. The male comes in for the kill."

"But—but, damn it, honey, you're not a lion!"

"I am," she told him, bluntly, "when somebody tries to kill the man I love and am going to marry, even before they get the body of Bully Bob Tanner in the ground."

He kept her to his left, and they were moving on, his rifle on the crook of his arm now, six-shooters shoved forward. In a little while they were at the place, and it was as he had expected—the killer had fled.

"Jeff, listen." The girl called to him in a low voice, her left hand up and pointing eastward. "Hoofs!"

He heard them then, a faint pounding in the distance. With a sudden gouge of his big rowels he wheeled his black and shot forward, cutting through the tangle of low trees. When he came to a grassy opening a terrific sting on his left cheek raised him in the saddle. Another hit the back of his neck, another the chin.

"Hornets, Jeff!" cried the girl behind him. "Hurry!"

Hurry, hell, he was burning the wind. A glance to his left had showed him the big, cone-shaped gray nest on the ground under one of the trees. Tracks in the grass showed that the killer's horses had been left here, and the horse had probably raked the nest down. This had delayed the killer's quick getaway, for it was a certainty that the horse had had to bolt with a cloud of hornets after him but had not gone too far with his dragging reins.

They pounded on, fighting flying clouds around them, going in the direction they had heard the hoofs. Coming to a thinning of the trees, devilish hornets left behind, Rider was suddenly pulling up and hitting the ground, the girl equally quick, her rifle ready.

"There he goes!" cried Rider. "There!"

The girl's answer was a shot. Her sights were on a fleeing rider on a tall bay, the man huddled low over the saddle horn, spurs

raking, a quirt rising and falling. Her bullet puffed dust a full two yards behind the horse.

"Lead 'im!" cried Rider, letting go his first shot. "A good three or four yards ahead! Like *that!*"

His first bullet had whipped dust ahead of the running bay. His second shot stumbled the horse, straightening the man in his saddle as he sawed up on the reins, his hat flying from his head.

The girl fired again, Rider a third time right behind her rifle's splintering report. It was long shooting, and their man was suddenly gone, his bay appearing to fall into a ravine as he vanished, the tops of brush stirring until he had rounded the toe of a tall rise.

"Linda," Rider's voice was very grave, yet very cool, "I want to ask you a question. Think a long time before you answer. We must be sure. I wouldn't hurt an innocent man for the world. Wait until we get back to the rim, and then tell me if you recognized that man."

"I did," she nodded, cool herself. "That hat he lost will make it certain. We've got to get it. I'll try to cover you while you get it, or you can try to cover me. . ."

THEY FOUND the sheriff and the doctor on the rim when they came back. Ben Murdock was still white-faced and kept placing his hand tenderly to his right side. There was a little spot of blood on the sleeve of his shirt, close to the elbow.

"Doc saw the way yuh two got up." He talked with a little gasp. "I was knocked cold for a couple of minutes or so. Bullet hit my handcuffs in the armhole of my vest, so danged hard Doc says it musta cracked a couple of ribs with the cuffs. In glancin' it nicked my arm. Yuh two catch a glimpse of anybody? I heard shootin'."

"We saw the man, yes." Young Jeff Rider's answer seemed reluctant. "Had I been in his boots, I would have killed Bob Tanner years ago, but I would have killed him to his face—"

"Wait, son!" The sheriff jerked up a gnarled hand. "Let me go on with the rest of it. I found his shells. One of them that killed Bob was deep in them pine needles. A sorter trickish play of a blade of sunlight made it shine. Here it is." He took a long, slender, bottle-necked shell of brass from his pocket, and handed it to Jeff.

"He fired only two shots when he killed Bob. He fired at least three this mornin', from a different gun. I've hunted with both of 'em. Guess he got too scared to pick up his shells. Men get that way when they kill from the bushes an'—"

"Then," cut in the girl, excitedly, "you know! And we know! He lost his hat when we were shooting at him." She quickly pointed to the skirts of Young Jeff's saddle. "There it is!"

"Lude Kenshaw?"

"Lude Kenshaw," nodded Rider. "We wouldn't trust just our eyes."



Then they reached the top. . . .

"Pore, simple-goin' Lude." The sheriff rubbed his chin, thoughtfully looking up at the bright sky. "If he'd done this 'round six year' ago, that night in the Red Mule, I'd a never locked 'im up. These are from his grizzly gun."

He took three more empty shells from another pocket, bouncing them in his hand. "Never could let a gun alone. Filled his ejector so sharp it cuts the butt of the shell when yuh work the lever right fast. Pore, pore fool!"

Doc Jim Jenny never said a word. . . .

"I've gotta go, Oliver! I've gotta! Yuh gotta help me!" Lude Kenshaw was again in Oliver Twink's office, not in a chair but on his knees in front of the huge, shining desk, tears pouring down his face. "Gimme that thousan'. I'll leave the most with my wife. She can sell the stables, the house, the few horses an' such. Later she can come to me 'way deep in Mexico or South America. I've got it all figured out."

"Where's the shell?" There was no more sympathy in Oliver Twink's eyes than in those of a dead man's. "And the shells of the shots you fired this morning?"

"I—I throwed 'em in the deepest hole in the creek I could find!" The lie came quick-

ly, for he knew he would never get any money out of this big man if he confessed that he had not been able to find the first shell and had completely forgotten the ones from the grizzly rifle in his terrific excitement on the rim. "I—I was afraid to bring 'em in on me!"

"And I sent you back for the one you lost." Those cold, dead-fish eyes were unblinking, nothing in them whatever, only scorn showing in the curling of the wide, fat lips. "Get out, Lude, and start heading for the tall, high timber—and keep going! *Not a dime from me!*"

"By Gawd, I mighta knowed!" Kenshaw bucked to his feet, terror gone for the moment, only hate filling his pale eyes. "Yuh wanted to start a fight in this country, war 'tween the Circle Star an' Old Jeff. Friends of both sides woulda ganged up. They'd needed money right soon, rich as they are. Yuh coulda loaned it, bled 'em to earth, an' then, by Gawd," he leaned forward, gripping the desk, "yuh coulda closed in. Hell, yuh ain't fooled me. Yuh wanted to marry Grace Fayette. Yo're still a-thinkin' yuh can marry her with Bully Bob gone, an' she wouldn't wipe her feet on yuh! Yuh—yuh fat louse!"

"Yuh tricked me, Oliver." Some of the old pleading was going to come back. "Now I've killed Ben. I know. I don't miss. I saw the dust fly where my bullet hit. I hit pore Doc Jim, too. Tried to kill Young Jeff, an' now I've got to go, an' yuh set there an' say yuh won't help me. There's a damn good way of gettin' even with yuh, an' if yuh wasn't such a crazy, money-hungry hound yuh could see it. All right, all right, Oliver."

His voice had dropped to a low, half-whispering whimpering as he turned for the door. "I aim to look after me now."

His hand was on the knob of the door, but he never turned it. A shot crashed behind him, pain screaming through his head. He fell against the door, turned, staggeringly starting back for the desk, blood a curtain coming down the side of his face.

Twink fired again from the little revolver he had taken from the center drawer of his desk. A man suddenly unable to stop himself from anything, he kept shooting, three of his shots going wild from the little five-shot as Kenshaw slumped to the floor. He was pawing in the drawer for more car-

tridges when the door swung open, sobering him with a jerk when he saw Young Jeff Rider standing there, a Colt in each hand, the sheriff, Doc Jim Jenny and a tall girl behind him.

"Drop it, Twink!"

"Why—why, of course!" Oliver Twink let his revolver fall, his big hands coming up as he slumped back in his chair. "He—he was in here trying to hold me up. Yes," he nodded with a jerk, "trying to rob me. Told me he killed Bully Bob. Said—said he'd shot you and Doc this morning, Ben."

"Bullet hit my handcuffs," grunted the sheriff, coming on in with Young Jeff. "Just busted the seat of Doc's pants. Just look at Lude, Doc."

"I am." Jenny was already down on his knees beside Kenshaw. "Hit twice, a rake on the side of the head, a small hole in his chest. Lude's a stout hog. He'll pull of this easy."

"Yeah, I'll—pull—out." Kenshaw was stirring, looking dazed on the floor. "I—gotta. Gotta tell who—killed Bully—Bob. It—it was Oliver. Loaned 'im my gun. Didn't have no cartridges. He bought—a box down in—the hardware store—"

"Me! You—you lousy liar!" Twink had bucked to his feet, eyes bulging, face like a dirty-yellow sheet. Damn it, he'd bought a box of cartridges yesterday for this lying fool when he said he didn't have the money for them. Why in the hell hadn't he given him the money? He'd just always hated to part with money. "You can't believe him! You know he's the worst liar and cheat in town, Ben!"

"Maybe, outside of yuh, Oliver," nodded the sheriff. "Go ahead with it, Lude. Yuh ain't gonna die."

"My rifle's at his house." Kenshaw was bursting out with a wild splatter of laughter. "In his bedroom, in the closet where he keeps his winter clothes. Ever'body knows he takes a hossback ride ever'day when the weather's good. He went out yesterday, an' shot Bully Bob. Lost a shell up there. Said he'd pay me five hundred to go get it—an' stop yuh fellas from findin' it. Go to his house—"

"I'll kill 'im!"

Oliver Twink whirled around the end of his big desk. Young Jeff Rider caught him, trying to push him back. In a second it was a fight, Twink smashing a fist into him,

then both arms around him, riding him by his sheer weight to the floor.

Rider managed to tear free, only a second before Linda Fayette jumped forward, grabbing a heavy book-end with the intent of smashing it down on Twink's head. As a mad buffalo, Twink came up. Rider feinted with a left, and whipped up a short right hook to the jaw, and the buffalo bull was down, sprawling backward and out on the floor.

"Keys are in his pocket, he says." Kenshaw was still laughing. "He—he wanted me to go up there an' sneak the rifle back to my saddle room. When—when I wouldn't do it he said he'd pile the blame on me. I started to walk out. He just started shootin'."

"All right, undersheriff." Old Ben Muddock removed his bullet-spattered handcuffs from his armhole. "Better click these on Oliver an' get 'im over to the jailhouse. Yuh know by now where to find the keys, an' I ain't foolin' at all about that undersheriff. Take Lude with yuh. Keep 'em far apart. Better go with 'im, Doc. Hell, he ain't hurt!"

"Better get a stretcher, anyhow," half-agreed the doctor. "He's not in exact shape to walk now, but I'll have 'im on his feet in a few days. That little hole in the chest doesn't mean much. Bullet went right on through."

THE END

"WELL, what do you make of it?" Young Jeff Rider asked the question an hour later, standing there with his girl in the office of the jail, high-pitched excitement flooding the town. In a rear cell was the now silent and fat Twink, sweating like a horse after several wild fits of cursing. On a cot in a cell upstairs Lude Kenshaw chuckled and groaned by turns, his thin, hard-bitten little wife let in and sitting beside him, trying to soothe his pain.

"Whut do I think of it?" The sheriff thoughtfully rubbed his chin and grinned from ear to ear. "Lude Kenshaw's lyin' to beat all unholy hell, good at it, too. He's got Twink belly-down over a barrel. We got them keys off of Twink, we found the gun in his clothes closet, extra cartridges with it, an' we've got straight proof that he bought 'em. Old Judge Lige Pender hates his guts. So does the prosecutor. Kenshaw'll be their sweet an' juicy meat when it comes to turnin' State's evidence, an' Lude'll go clear.

"Knowin' all that," he yawned now, "I'd say Oliver Twink'll get from twenty to fifty years, nobody likin' Bully Bob. Me an' Doc won't prosecute Lude for takin' them pops at us. But, look now!" He was suddenly banging to his feet. "Let's go upstairs to the clerk's office an' get the license. Hell, yuh an' Linda can come right on over to my house an' have the knot tied there!"



"THE HAND-GUN HURRICANE!"

That one noose, filled with an honest man, brought stark terror to those God-fearing Rincon cowmen. . . . And sent Bill Cameron, alone, up the risky, twisting trail that could end only in the hell of snarling bushwhack lead—or in a command invitation to join his friend in the grisly Dead

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SWING YOUR PARDNER HIGH!

DAVE GRAIN was shaving in the back yard when Star Atkinson came toiling up the trail. Dave had a mirror pegged to a slim redwood tree, and a shelf under the mirror for his mug and brush and tonic, and a hook under the shelf for his strop. He could rig a tarp between the redwood and his one-room cabin, for use when it rained. A handy, condensed outfit, taking little space and doing him as much service as a six-room house.

Star, a man fifteen years older than Dave, but with the same hard-built, spare ruggedness of body, puffed a little, and appeared glad to reach the bench. He sat down and said, "Heard you was back, Dave. Find any good timber?" And by the way he

Trouble was Dave Grain's middle name, and nobody wanted him any more than they wanted the trouble he brought with him. Nobody, that is, but the sprung killer he'd sent to the pen. He was looking for them both



The room fell silent when Dave stepped inside. Del stood at the bar.

**By JOHN JO
CARPENTER**

said it, Dave knew he had something else on his mind. He was honest, pretty smart, very level-headed, but not subtle, was Star Atkinson.

Star had been sheriff here for twelve years, the last three of which Dave was his Number One deputy. The last election had turned them both out of office. Dave was a timber scout now for Cap Cash's outfit. Star had gone back to running a restaurant in Lumbergap.

"No, I didn't find any merchant stands of timber," Dave said, getting rid of the words between pinches of his cheek, "but I found something else. Star, I'm going in the cattle business. The timber peters out east of the Mennonite river—but grass! There's eight hundred head of two-year-old heifers due in from Texas this week, mebber tomorrow."

"Longhorns?"

"Yes. But he's bringing in some good grade bulls, and one blooded whiteface. Halvers, him and me."

Star scratched his head thoughtfully. Dave watched him out of the corner of his eye, wondering when he would come out with it.

"That don't sound like Cap. His grass, his cows, and you take half. What's the catch?"

"The catch," Dave said, grinning, "is that it's not his grass. When I saw there was no timber, I filed on it myself. It wasn't a double-cross—not in my book, not at the wages Cap pays. He hit the roof, but what could he do? He'll have it scouted again, but there's no merchant timber there."

"And you had the gall to proposition him on the cow business, after coppin' a lease right under his nose?" Dave went on shaving, and Star swore feelingly. "You always did have nerve."

"There's another catch," Dave said. "I've got to put up two thousand dollars. Star, how much money have you got?"

"A thousand, mebber," Star said. "But no, thanks! Count me out. Me—I'm just the restaurant man in Lumbergap. You go ahead and get rich."

He got around to it then, led there by this train of thought. He watched Dave shave a minute, and then said, "Dave, Del Meadows is back in town. Paroled."

"That," said Dave, "is what we get by

electing a damnfool town man for governor."

"Wouldn't it be kind of smart for you to go somewhere for a little while, Dave?"

Dave shook his head.

"No. I'm not in the law business any more. Del Meadows means nothing to me. The Governor of Oregon paroled him. The law authorities of Oregon can worry about him. I'm in the cow business." He wiped his face and doused it with tonic—half vinegar and half whiskey—and tenderly put away the razor. He met Star's worried eyes and laughed. "You can buy in for a quarter interest for that thousand, Star. Dirt cheap. I've got to put up a thousand, and my lease too."

"Where are you going to get a thousand dollars?" Dave had saved a few dollars once, but it all went into Star's unsuccessful election campaign. They did a good job, Dave said, and it was worth that much to back their records. "I'll bet you haven't got two fifty cent pieces to rub together."

"Wrong!" Dave said gaily. He dashed his hand into his pocket and pulled out the two coins. "And I know where I can borrow two bits more."

Star shook his head angrily.

"You're a fool. I wish you'd go somewhere for a while, Dave. Del's just out of the pen. His mind ain't used to being free. He's no good, and you know them circumstantial evidence cases. He blames you. Look, Dave, I don't worry about ordinary threats no more than you do. Lord knows I got enough of 'em in twelve years in that consarned courthouse. But Del's bad medicine. He was brung up in Texas, he handles a pistol like a knife and fork. You know how he can get that thing out. He—"

"He's pretty good," Dave admitted, "shooting from the hip. Personally, I wouldn't let him get that close. You remember those pretty little medals I used to hang on the wall of the office during election time?"

Star nodded grudgingly—they had been marksmanship merit awards won by Dave in his Army career, before he settled in Oregon. "A quick-draw man is pretty limited as to accuracy. I'm limited only by the range of my gun. I'm better than I ever was. I suppose I'm the best pistol shot in the world."

In another man it might have been brag-

ging, but Star knew from old experience that if Dave wasn't the best, he could crowd the best in a match. It had been said that way to reassure him, and he could not be reassured.

"Dave," he pleaded, once more, "he swore he'd get you. The whole town remembers it, and now the son-of-a-gun's got to get you. Give him a few days to get the prison air out of his blood, and go somewhere. Go up to Portland and get drunk. Go scout some more timber for Cap Cash."

Dave laughed uproariously.

"For Cap? He'll never trust me again as long as he lives—as a scout. No, I'm in the cattle business. Come inside, Star, and I'll show you the maps. I want you in with me. Bernice will love it there, and so will the kids. Bernice has hated this town ever since you got beat. I'll prove to—"

"I haven't got time," Star staid. "Polly's in a school program tonight, goin' to recite that piece about the boy on the burn-in' deck. Got to get home to supper."

"I'll go with you," Dave said. "Haven't got a bite to eat in the house. Thanks for the invitation."

HE WENT to the program and heard ten-year-old Polly's recitation. She had Bernice's looks and quick mind, and it was not as bad as the rest of it. He was a single man, almost the only one there, and the whole show was deeply comical to him. But he really got most of his fun out of the audience. Hard-drinking, hard-fighting, hard-working timber stiffs who would have cut his heart out for one antagonistic word, were hunched down in their chairs, smiling foolishly and fondly and with proud, red faces as their offspring performed on the little plank stage.

"You give me the thousand," he told Bernice afterward. "You be my partner, and Star can work for us. For wages."

It looked good to Bernice. He could tell by the faraway look in her eyes. She hated the city, and she hated this little timber town which tried so hard to be a city. But she shook her head.

"Star and I, we're getting old, Dave," she said. "We can't afford to be gallivanting around with a fool like you. What would happen to our thousand dollars if Del Meadows caught up with you? That's the kind of a chance we can't afford to take."

It was Bernice's words that made him hunt for Del that evening, after the program. Polly played out, and he carried her on his back through the town, while Bernice carried six-year-old Buster, and seven-year-old Harold slept in his dad's arms. At the edge of town, however, where the tall timber began again, Bernice made him put the girl down.

"She can walk now. You go on about your business, Dave."

"Why? She's not heavy."

"I know," Bernice said snappishly, "but she's on your back, and I don't want a kid of mine there in case somebody should take a notion to shoot you in the back, and I'm not mentioning any names. Go on with you, Dave. I like you, but I don't like what you're apt to attract."

He put Polly down and stalked away without another word. She was carrying it a little too far. She had been in town too long, and she didn't have the mentality that could stand town. Sure, there was gossip! Lumbergap lived for gossip. Del's parole alone would have been a three-day-wonder, even without his threats. They made it a six-day wonder. The town would talk its head off until the parolee got over his first drunk, got a job, and began to look like any other payday stiff.

Del Meadows had had a chance to be somebody, once. As a sixteen-year-old giant, timberjacking with men twice his age, he had attracted the attention of a wealthy old lumberman by the name of Frank Dee. Dee took him into his house, and practically adopted him. The arrangement worked, it appeared, for twelve years.

It was only after Dee's murder that Dave, as deputy sheriff, began unravelling things about the Dee-Meadows arrangement that made him suspicious. He never got a confession, but he got a conviction on the basis of some angry memoranda they found in old Frank's diary. That was four years ago. The jury, out seventy-two hours, compromised on manslaughter.

He found Del in the saloon that occupied the corner of the first floor of the hotel. Adjoining the saloon was the hotel office and a casino. Saturday night was still two days away, but the saloon and casino were packed, and the clerk said he was booking the rooms two men to a bed and two on the floor.

Men had streamed in from camps all around—and not because it was the season, either. Word that Del Meadows was back had brought them. They wanted to see what he'd do about making good his brags. A number of them wanted to see him do it, Dave knew. As the deputy in charge of the county-seat part of the county, he had preserved order at the expense of some rough enforcement on a few rollicking Saturday nights.

Del looked his thirty years. Prison had scaled off some of his weight, but apparently it had not weakened his powerful body much. There were no other changes that Dave could discern. He didn't look good, but then he had never looked good to Dave.

The room fell silent when he stepped inside, and the men standing next to Del at the bar pulled away from him. Dave was unarmed, and as far as he could tell, so was Del. He walked over and planted himself in front of the big man.

"When you went away from here, you said something about looking me up when you got back. You've been back the better part of a week and you haven't tried to find me. There's been enough talk—from big mouths that have nothing better to do—that I thought I'd better look you up. Was there anything you wanted to say to me, Meadows?" he said clearly.

Del's jaws clenched and his eyes narrowed. He swallowed a time or two, but said nothing. Dave had a fleeting instant of apprehension, looking into those eyes. There was a definite threat there, but he had expected that. What he had not expected was an almost overpowering hint of menace—something that made those threats valid. He stepped closer and lowered his voice, bulling the game in the old way he had learned as a non-com in the Army and subsequently, as a peace officer.

"Look here, Meadows, we'll understand each other here and now. You're a damned back-biting, murdering ingrate killer, and I'd run you out of town at the end of a sharp pole if I was still a law officer.

"But I'm not. I'm in the cow business and I haven't got anything to say about this town or what goes on in it. If the incumbent sheriff will let trash like you hang around here—parole or no parole—it's his business. I understand he found 'business'

somewhere else for a week or so. Well, that's neither here nor there.

"What I came here to see about, Meadows, is what you intend to do about those remarks you made after your conviction. Sure—I'm the man that convicted you! Sure—I'm the man that sent you to the pen! Sure—I'm the man that branded you then and now as the cheap, cowardly slob that would shoot the man that befriended him in the back. I'm not looking for trouble. I just want to know this—are you?"

DEL STARTED to say something. He got as far as, "Get out of here. You don't wear no tin badge any—"

Then his temper got the best of him. He launched himself at Dave, pushing himself forward with powerful thrusts from the bar, and his huge arms were strong enough to rock it and bring a yell from the bartender.

Dave had been five weeks in the back country alone, working hard, eating well and sleeping well. He had a fine edge on his body that hadn't been worked off yet. He grinned and sent out a left and caught Del flush in the mouth, tearing it open and bringing a spurt of blood. He backed all the way across the saloon, bringing Del with him, punishing him cruelly, brutally, in a methodical, leisurely fashion that looked all the worse because Del was so big and dangerous-looking himself.

He let Del fall on his face, knocked out hard enough to stay that way for an hour without some kind of artificial stimulus. He had done the job he set out to do—mark the man as prison could not, apparently, mark him. Del had cuts that would never heal without scars, no matter how good the surgeon that attended them. His nose was beaten flat, both eyes were closed, and three teeth were missing from his shapeless, pulpy mouth.

Dave sucked his knuckles, through which agony was beginning to throb, and said to the crowd in the saloon, "If anybody else here likes trouble, why wait for Del to do the job? I'm not choosy." Neither was anyone else. The silence, as he went out the door, seemed to say after him, "Depart in peace!"

There was a telegraph office in the stage depot, and it was here he was to be advised of the arrival of his cattle at the rail-

head, twenty-eight miles southward. There was no message for him the next day, or the next. He did not bring up the subject of the partnership with Star again, although he ate all of his meals in Star's place—on the cuff. He was flat broke—he had never been in worse shape financially in his life.

On the second day he went into the bank and asked them for two thousand dollars, and got turned down. He knew he would—it was Cap Cash's bank from the back of the vault to the spittoon just inside the front door. Cap was his partner. He would be fair enough, within the letter of the law, but under their agreement he got the entire first year's profits unless Dave put up two thousand dollars.

"No harm in trying," Dave said, as he went out. "Thanks anyway."

On the central pillar of the bank building a new poster had been tacked up. It read:

\$1000 REWARD

For the Apprehension of
Any Person Robbing, or Attempting
To Rob This Bank, Armed or by Stealth.
This Reward Will
Be Paid

On **DEAD OR ALIVE** Terms

The figure brought a thought to Dave's mind: *there's half the money I need*. He grinned. There had been an epidemic of bank robberies throughout the state in the last year or two. He prided himself that they would shy away from Lumbergap, and then the thought left him feeling foolish—he and Star didn't represent the law here any more.

The next morning his wire came, and he went down to railhead and caught a new ignition of enthusiasm as the wild longhorns were unloaded from the cars. They were thin, but they were a hardy breed, and they would multiply like rabbits in the tall grass he had discovered beyond the mountains. They worked the plump 'breed bulls over roughly when they were turned out on the trail, though the bulls were twice their size. But it meant they were tough. They'd abuse mountain lions, timber wolves, bears and coyotes the same way.

He found two men who would help him haze them northward along the bottom of the valley, on credit. The heifers were hungry, and not hard to handle because there was plenty of feed here. They took their

time, and on the second day out were only halfway to Lumbergap when Star Atkinson came riding into their camp.

"I suppose you've got an alibi," Star said. "The bank was busted into last night. Six thousand in specie and bills missing, the last count."

"Where's Del Meadows?" was Dave's first question.

"Gone. Faded back into the hills after that beatin'-up you gave him. No, it ain't likely it's Del," Star said. "He wasn't in no shape to bore through three feet of cement and rock wall."

He told Dave how the burglary had been accomplished, and it stirred Dave's suspicions. It was a semi-professional job, not the kind a city burglar would do, but possibly the work of one who had been schooled by city burglars. Del was smart enough to learn what he could in the pen. As for his physical condition, there was plenty of Texas longhorn in him. Most of his hurts were on the exterior.

"I'd bet a nickel he could pick up three sacks of bran and walk a mile with them the day after I whipped him," Dave said.

He argued with Star, who said, "Don't let your grudge against Del get the best of your judgment, Dave. What kind of a man could come back after a beatin' like that and spend four hours cuttin' through to the vault?"

And Dave said, "Del's kind! He killed old Frank Dee for money, didn't he? And what do you learn in the pen but the need and importance of money—big money? He's more likely to do that than to keep his empty threats against me."

"In his own home town?" Star said skeptically.

"Frank Dee was in his own home, wasn't he?" Dave shot back.

Star went back to Lumbergap without telling Dave that he, too, had been under investigation. Dave had to learn that himself when he arrived there. His two men were going back to railhead the next morning. From here, Dave would have to move his own cattle, alone. He had only two hours to spend in the town, buying camp supplies, again on the cuff, and picking up his two extra horses at his shack.

The word that he had been investigated started him blazing, but the sheriff, a trifle lamely and uneasily, explained it. Dave,

after all, needed money badly. He was out of town. All they did, the sheriff said, was check on his presence at the cattle chute. That verified, they had no further interest in him. Just another routine check.

As for Del Meadows—sure, they were looking for him. Had men out now, two of them with dogs. But of course Dave knewed that Meadows knowed the country like the palm of his hand. It wouldn't be easy to catch him—and what would they find when they did catch him? No, the sheriff said, the bird they wanted was a city bird, 'no doubt headed back to Portland or San Francisco or someplace by now. Mebbe Seattle, mebbe east.

Well, it wasn't Dave's business any more. He went back to his cattle, and took a pint with him. The three of them killed it joyfully that night, and the next morning the two helped him get the heifers through the gap before starting back. From here on, driving wouldn't be quite so hard. The contour of the country was all in his favor.

Half an hour later Star Atkinson came riding up, leading a pack horse.

"The thousand dollars is in the bank in your name. You can send the old hellion a check any time," he said. "You're about the biggest fool in the world, I reckon, but you chunked yours in when the campaign was goin' against me."

"Go back home," Dave said, "and tend to your cafe. I don't want your money."

"I'm in the cow business," Star said, shaking his head. "Law, Dave, you didn't think Bernice would let me pass up a chance to get the kids out of that saloon capital, did you? I'm your pardner, don't you know me?"

And that was Star Atkinson. From then on it was easy. The other thousand would come, and Dave knew how. Once they got the cattle moved into Big Grass Valley, as he had already named it in his mind—once they got a cabin up for Bernice and the kids—once they got pegged down to a spot, he'd go after Del Meadows. He had been a law officer too long not to be sure. He had learned quite a bit about Del, on the Dee case—more than anybody else. No, there was his thousand dollars.

THREE DAYS later they were out of the redwoods, and the yellow pines gave notice that not much more big timber re-

mained. Dave was all eagerness to get back to his valley. It was *home* now, not just a place where the grass grew tall.

"Wait'll you see it, Star! Wait till Bernice sees it! There'll be towns there someday, because they follow money and there's money to be made where feed grows like that," he said.

Star paid no attention. He was swearing fiercely, going through his packsaddles with careless, angry hands.

"My shirt! My only other shirt, the one Bernice made just last week—the danged packrats or something got into the bundle last night and chewed it to pieces!"

He held up the frayed garment. Not enough remained of it to cover much of him. He ripped out a string of curses that would have had Bernice after him in a fury.

"Wear your other one," Dave said.

"Ain't got no other one. Think I'm a three-shirt man?"

"The dirty one."

"It was stiff as a board," Star wailed, "and I left it in the crick to soak last night and it's gone—they got it, too."

"Wear one of mine," Dave offered. "I bought four new mail order ones just before I went scouting for Cap."

Star took the shirt, a red-and-black checked pattern that Dave had learned to be comfortable in years ago. It cost more than a man with three kids could afford for everyday use, but it was warm. The pack rats, he opined, might have done him a favor after all.

They were sloping down a steep canyon on the first part of this morning's drive. Dave had the best horse. He rode behind, moving up stragglers which insisted on exploring the steep canyon walls. Star rode ahead, driving the docile bulls and breaking trail. The heifers would follow the bulls by now, and Dave had coached Star in the route ahead.

It was almost noon, and they were less than a quarter of a mile apart, with the cattle bunched between them on the narrow valley floor, when it happened. Star was just splashing across the creek on his horse, and Dave had stood up in his stirrups to wave him to the right, when he saw Star clutch at his chest and fall forward. The horse, knee-deep in water, tried to run. It stumbled to its knees and Star slid off slowly.

Then Dave heard the report of the gun—a .30-30—fired from high up on the canyon wall above them. The report cracked and echoed from wall to wall and took a long time dying. Much longer than Star. He trailed in the water a moment, one foot caught in the stirrup. The horse stumbled to its feet, the bulls turned and snorted as the Thing floated down toward them, and the wild heifers scattered. Star Atkinson's body caught in a pebbly sandbar and stayed there without moving.

There was no use going to see about him. No man could be hit that way, fall that way, float that far and lie that still and have any life in him. There was no need asking who did it, or why. It was Del Meadows.

"Star was wearin' my shirt," Dave gritted. "Del could see him but not me. Naturally thought I'd be up ahead, since I knew the trail. And there go my heifers all over Oregon."

He let the heifers go and pushed the horse up the side of the slope. The trail ended, he had to double back and make another one, and then it petered out on him. He lost count of time and listened only for something that would betray the man with the .30-30, up above him. He pushed the horse as he had never pushed a horse, spurring it roughly over ridges that he would have taken on foot ordinarily.

At the top of the grade he found Del Meadows' sign, and from here he could look down and see Star Atkinson. Star had not moved. Del's tracks were plain enough—he had not bothered to conceal them, since he expected to get both men before he moved on. The winded horse was only an encumbrance now. Dave peeled off the saddle, tied the animal short to a tree, and hoped he would get back before it got too hungry.

He had worn his gun, a .45, since leaving Lumbergap. He carried it in his hand now, following Del's trail in a running crouch. He had always been a man in the woods. So was Del, but he would not be expecting pursuit this close. Dave could afford to be a little careless. The old deputy sheriff's training asserted itself—the faculty of balancing things, of deciding what to ignore and what to observe.

Only this time he was not sworn to an oath. This time he did not have to bring a man back for a compromise-minded jury.

This time he could shoot Del Meadows.

He heard the .30-30 again, and threw himself down on the ground, wondering why he had not heard the slug. He lay there listening a moment. He was up high now, but the creek was hidden from his sight. One of the wild longhorn heifers broke through the brush a little ahead of him. Already frightened, she spun and ran down like a deer when he threw dirt at her and hissed.

When she turned her rump to him he saw blood on it. He grinned. Del had been firing at cattle, thinking, no doubt, that the heifer was Star Atkinson's horse! He was getting nervous. The prison term, the beating, hadn't done his nerve much good.

Dave stood up and kept running until he could look down and see the creek again. Star Atkinson's body was plain to be seen, still moored against the pebbly spit of sand. Suddenly something hit the water beside it, and the .30-30 rang loudly not very far ahead. Another shot, this time not so close, but it sprinkled the body with sand.

Dave had lost Del's tracks among the rocks here, but he charged forward toward the sound of the gun, yelling at the top of his voice.

"I'm comin' after you, Del! Don't try to run now, because I'm comin' after you. I'm going to get you, Del! I'm going to kill you this time, Del!"

He could hear Del whimpering oaths, he could hear his frantic attempts to clear the rifle of a jammed shell, even before he saw the big man. Dave burst through the brush and found Del on a big, flat table of gray granite at the edge of the canyon wall. His face had not healed yet, and Dave saw he had done a better job than he remembered—that right eye never would heal now. Del had on a pair of bib overalls, and a big, black hat, and a gray-checked shirt and his old spiked boots.

He threw down the jammed rifle and went for his .45, and Dave pulled up short and took his time. He felt Del's first one burn past his ear, just as he pulled the trigger. His hand was too stiff to suit him, and the muscles of his arm a little too tight, but it was easier than some of the competition he had been in because Del was a bigger target.

He put the first one in Del's abdomen, to knock him down and paralyze him and

make Del's gun impotent. He saw the tremendous vitality of the man stiffen him enough to bring the gun up again. Del was done for and he knew it, but he would not shoot from the hip this time.

Del sagged to his knees, with blood pouring out of the big hole in his belly, his shapeless mouth contorted with the effort to retain his strength, and slowly brought the gun almost level.

Dave waited, and he grinned into Del's eyes when it became apparent that the man never would have the strength to do the job. The grin gave him more. He pulled his left hand away from his wounded belly and gripped the .45 with both hands, and with one last, galvanic convulsion of all of his powerful muscles, lifted the gun and pulled the trigger.

That was when Dave shot him. He stepped aside, out of range of that last slug, and took careful aim between Del's eyes. This time, Del went over and did not move again.

Dave holstered the gun and went to the edge of the rock, taking care, with trained lawman's ways, not to disturb them empty brass cartridges that lay there. He looked down at the little red-checked dot that was all that was left of Star Atkinson, and started to say, "Poor Bernice! And I've got to tell—"

Then Star Atkinson sat up, and with one arm began jacking himself upward, out of the cold water. The other dangled limp in the red-checked sleeve. Dave swore and began running, and he swore again when he reached his horse because he had unsaddled him and had to do that again.

"WHAT DO you take me for—a damn fool?" Star snarled at him. "When a man shoots at you, the best thing you can do is be dead if you can't shoot back. Do you think there was a .30-30 on *me*? Do you think *you're* the only one with any sense?"

"Winged you bad," Dave said, ignoring Star's furious temper. Star did not mind getting hit nearly so bad as he minded Dave's lapse in judgment. "But no bones busted. You'll be all right."

"Sure, I'll be all right, no thanks to you! Did you come fish me out of that danged cold water? No—I had to lay there, and let him pop at me when I wiggled. How

would *you* like to lay in cold water like that with a hole in your arm? All I did was try to sneak my left arm under my body to plug up the hole. And he shot!"

"I thought he was shooting at a dead man," Dave confessed. "I thought he was taking his vengeance out on what he thought was my dead body. That's why I didn't give him a chance up there. Star, I did it the hard way. It wasn't killing. It was murder."

"It was execution," Star said.

He stumbled weakly to his feet.



Dave shot him. . . .

"Got to get them cows rounded up and get goin'," he said. "I won't be fit for anything but cookin' for awhile. Get a fresh horse and start bunchin' them heifers of ourn."

Dave's head had cleared a little. He shook it.

"No. There's two posses out with dogs, after Del. We've got to find his camp before they do. That's Cap Cash's bank, and I've got a hunch he's going to want us to turn over the missing funds before he pays off the thousand, dead or alive. And I'd like to do it, Star, just to show Lumbergap what a mistake they made at the last election.

"It'll be too late, though," Star warned him, with a wan smile. "I'm in the cow business now, and so are you. Cain't be bothered with sheriffin' again."

The posse took the money back, and Bernice turned the two thousand dollars over to Cap Cash for them, and when she came out to Big Grass Valley a month later she let Polly ride pig-a-back on Dave's shoulders and never said a word.



THE SECRET OF SKELETON CANYON

What was the sinister secret hidden deep up the tortuous passages of the unknown San Juan? Desperate men had killed each other to find its answer, long before Steve Duncan risked his life to uncover it, and won instead the howling wrath of a hundred dead gods, who rose to throw him back into hell's teeth, for daring to break the dread mystery of Skeleton Canyon! . . .

Chapter I

SAN JUAN THE UNKNOWN

STEVE DUNCAN sat on the edge of his bed in a room on the second floor of the Hovenweep House in Desert Center. He was looking at his watch and cursing his own stupidity with a quiet mental fluency. A man had to make up his mind what he was, and when he decided, he had to stick with his decision. If he didn't, he was apt to wind up with a flat belly and no feed for his trail stock.

Either he was a desert packer—a sun-burned skipper of a string of horses, for hire

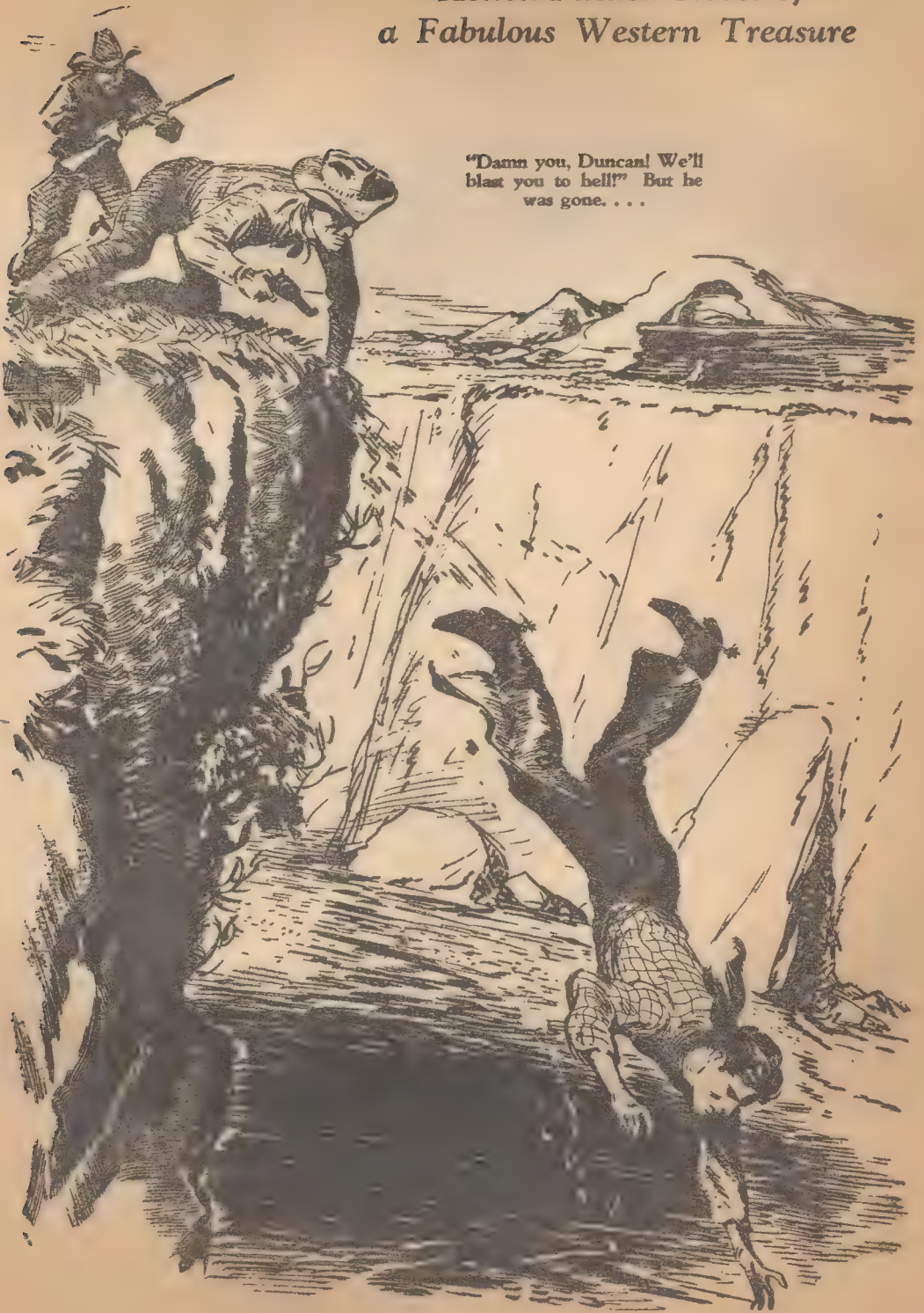
like his animals, and owner of a hard-won knowledge of the impenetrable crazy man's country between the wild upper Colorado and the wilder San Juan—or he was an archeologist.

Archeologists starved to death. Particularly amateur ones. Steve looked at his watch and thought about the two messages a runner had brought to his camp on Firestick Creek. One had been a flat hundred dollars a day offer for himself and ten of his best horses to take a vacation party up

By **TOM W. BLACKBURN**

Action-Packed Novel of
a Fabulous Western Treasure

"Damn you, Duncan! We'll
blast you to hell!" But he
was gone. . . .



the course of the San Juan to the place where that devil's river very neatly cut across the geographical pinpoint marking the common boundary of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona.

A typical party, Steve judged. Probably a painter in it. And a photography hound would make a packer's life hell supervising the loading and unloading of his equipment. An Oklahoma oil man or a Wyoming rancher, who was putting up most of the cost of the trip in the hope the hometown papers would call it an expedition. Maybe a newspaperman on leave, claiming it was a vacation but actually hoping to turn out a diary of harrowing escapades over which the big national weeklies would fight when he offered it to them for publication. Maybe a fisherman with a box of hand-tied flies, itching to try his own special Zebra hackle or braided bucktail in water so silt-laden it was doubtful if a Mississippi channel-cat could survive most seasons of the year.

A lot of grief, maybe, but profitable. The kind of thing a desert man dreams about in off-season.

The other message had been a much-forwarded telegram. It had been terse.

DESIRE COMPETENT GUIDE TO UPPER SAN JUAN FROM DESERT CENTER. YOU HAVE BEEN RECOMMENDED. IF INTERESTED MEET ME HOVENWEEP HOUSE THE NINTH EIGHT PM.

L. HALLIDAY

Steve supposed it had been the signature which had done it. Not everybody on the high desert knew the name of Lucien Halliday. But those who had even a passing interest in the ancient cities—the mounds, the heaps of rock, the dust and debris which covered an unknown history in Bandelier and the Chaco, Canyon de Chelly and Mesa Verde, in a hundred remote canyons and mesa tops not yet discovered—had heard the name. Dean of Archeology at the University of New Mexico. The foremost authority on pre-Pueblo Indian culture in the world.

Professor Halliday's telegram had made no offer on fees. It had guaranteed no minimum. There hadn't been anything to it, actually, but the mention of the San Juan and the signature. But Steve had sent a refusal to the sportsmen who wanted him

to guide them on their vacation. And he had started out across the desert with four of his best horses on a crazy ride to reach Desert Center before the ninth of the month.

Now he was at the end of the ride. It was the ninth. It was eight in the evening. And Professor Halliday was not in the Hovenweep House. He was not expected. No one in Desert Center knew anything about a University expedition for this season. And Steve Duncan was certain he had been a fool.

Arturo Lopez could have sent that telegram to get Steve Duncan off of the San Juan when a profitable party was making up. But it didn't sound like Arturo, so it was probably big Sam McKesson. Sam liked dirty cards. He hoped it was Sam. He hoped Sam did get the sportsmen. He might get them eventually to the Four Corners, although Steve doubted it.

Sam navigated by bottle, rather than the river, and a bottle was a poor compass on the San Juan. Sam liked to take a profit on everything, including feed for his stock. He didn't have a good desert horse in his string. Not the kind that could keep going on heart when everything else gave out. And it took that kind on the San Juan.

If the sportsmen thought they could get off with a hundred dollars a day when Sam McKesson was their guide, they were crazy. Sam had lost parties before now when there was an argument on a fee and then found them later, at his price. And once or twice he had come back to the Center alone. Sam claimed it was bad luck. Steve doubted that. McKesson made his own luck and all of it was profitable.

Thrusting his watch back into his pocket, Steve rose from the bed. To hell with it. Hunkering in a hot hotel room, grouching because a competitor had neatly cut him out of a good party, accomplished nothing. There was a fair bar below stairs. A couple of drinks would blunt the sting a little. Then he'd saddle up and head back to Firestick Creek. It was getting late in the season, but maybe there'd be a party of hunters in a little later. He'd watch for his chance to get a swing in at Sam McKesson.

AS HE pulled open the door of his room, Steve was aware of a scratching sound in the hall. A woman was bent before the

lock of the door of the room opposite, struggling with the key. She straightened as Steve closed his own door. There are a number of strange people on the high desert, but Steve winced at this one. She was apparently young, but this was the best which could be said for her. A school-teacher, he decided immediately, and a teacher in some one of the remote Indian missions, at that. It would have to be a pretty thin line of civilization which could stomach her.

She had on an old, much-worn skirt, cut just short enough to show the scuffed leather of a pair of old high-top button shoes. A scant inch of coarse cotton stocking showed above this. The skirt was shapeless. So was the sagging blue jacket above it. And above the jacket was the head, crowned with a bird's-nest hat, from which stray wisps of broken straw jutted disconcertingly.

There was a great deal of hair, very black and twisted into a conical heap which lifted the hat inches above the top of the head. There were a pair of straight brows, dark and rather heavy, above eyes which peered roundly out through a pair of thick-rimmed glasses so powerful that they magnified the eyes alarmingly. The cheeks were sunken and the lips bulged out from the teeth and gaped stupidly open. The creature smiled nervously at Steve and spoke in a hoarse, forced voice.

"Oh, excuse me, but I'm having trouble with my door. Do you suppose you could unlock it for me?"

Steve was tempted to pretend she was speaking Navajo, and a dialect he did not understand. Instead, he took the key from her hand and thrust it into the lock. The tumblers turned effortlessly. He swung the door open. She stepped through it. As she passed him, she caught his wrist and gave it a tug.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you very much," she said. "Now if you could give me a hand with my valise—I'm not very good with locks, I'm afraid—"

Steve hung back. The hand on his wrist pulled strongly. And suddenly the woman spoke in a different voice, much softer and very compelling.

"Come in, come in—quickly. Don't spoil it all, now!"

Startled, Steve stepped on into the room.

The woman sat down on the edge of the bed, lifted her skirt, and swiftly unbuttoned both shoes. Kicking them off, she curled her toes luxuriantly in the cotton stockings, which Steve saw were several sizes too large. Rising again, she peeled off the shapeless jacket, pulled some hooks free, and stepped out of the heavy skirt. She made a face and spat two twisted rolls of cotton into her hand.

Her lips immediately lost their unnatural, distended look, and they parted in a very nice smile. Her hands went to her head. The hat came off. A couple of pins fell to the floor. She shook her head and the hair cascaded down to hang in soft splendor below the line of her shoulders. She removed the ugly glasses and her eyes turned out to be very beautiful. In fact, she was very beautiful all over, a slender girl in blouse and slip and stocking feet, laughing softly at him. Steve swallowed. The girl put out her hand.

"Steve Duncan?" she said. "Sure, you'd have to be. I've seen your pictures in a couple of expedition reports. I'm sorry I had to meet you this way, but it's been necessary, every bit of it. I'm Laura Halliday."

Steve's mind seized upon the fact that Professor Halliday could have a daughter like this. Professor Halliday was a remarkable man. He slowly coped with the realization that this was the meeting for which he had given up the big pack party Sam McKesson had undoubtedly taken into the San Juan. He began to have a kindly feeling toward McKesson.

"You sent that telegram?" he asked.

The girl nodded. "Yes. But let the explaining go, for now. We've got to move fast. Where is your stock?"

"At the livery."

"You were just leaving your room. What were you going to do?"

Steve grinned. "Get drunk," he said. "I thought I'd missed you—ah—Professor Halliday. Get drunk and maybe bust somebody in the nose. I was sore."

"Go ahead," the girl said earnestly. "Get convincingly drunk. That'll be good. But leave the nose-busting out. We haven't got time for it. Get drunk. A little after midnight, pick up your animals at the livery and head west out of town, as if you were heading back to your camp. That'll look

just right. Can you do that all right?"

"But you—"

The girl made a face. "I'll get into this witch outfit again. Just once more. I'll be out along the trail. I'll meet you there."

"Wait a minute," Steve protested. "I've got to know. Who you hiding from, your father?"

"Dad went into the San Juan alone nearly two months ago, Mr. Duncan," Laura Halliday said quietly. "He sent me messages twice. He found something big. The last time, there was a map with the message. Somebody stole that map from me. If dad has found what I think he has, his life is in danger. We've got to beat whoever has that map to his camp. That enough explanation for now?"

"Plenty," Steve said. He turned to the door. "See you at midnight."

THE HOVENWEEP'S bar was nearly deserted. Two couples, at the lower end, were betrayed as tourists by the perfection of their desert gear. Shirts, slacks, boots, and shirts were all trading-post variety, such as Steve himself wore. They were dusty and showed signs of use. But they fitted the wearers too well and in spite of apparent wear, they were a little too new.

Steve grinned at the two men and their wives. These were the kind of tourists the southwest needed. The kind who would belly-up to a bar for a talk with some of the old-timers—the kind who would listen. Folks who weren't afraid of the springs on their cars and what a sand gust might do to the paint. People who had a real interest in the country.

Midway up from the tourists were a couple of stock men, probably moving through from the rails far to the south, headed back up to their own sparse range in the slick-rock country. Men whose constant solitude made it impossible for them to mingle freely when they hit a community even as remote as Desert Center. Quiet and uncommunicative men.

There was no other trade in the bar. Steve himself kept apart, ordering a Saguaro and cupping the small, dark-hued glass in his hand. He wanted to think about what the girl upstairs had told him. He wanted to think about Lucien Halliday.

Archeological exploration of the high desert country had turned up a new kind

of wealth. As much as possible, wherever it had control through a national monument or park, the Federal government had taken strong steps to prevent piracy. And the museums of the country, realizing that amateur excavation of ruins resulted in the destruction of priceless artifacts which a skilled archeologist could remove intact, agitated constantly against private excavation, particularly for profit.

But it was these same museums, who after all were anxious to secure all the authentic displays they could, who had created the market which made unofficial excavation a profitable enterprise. A single small ruin, covered deeply enough for safety or protected by location from weathering, and which had never before been touched, could produce enough marketable museum items to make it's discoverer a respectable fortune.

That Lucien Halliday had gone into the San Juan alone was plain enough indication of an important discovery. So important that he had not wanted to risk a full-scale expedition on the initial trip for fear information might leak out as to its existence before he could take steps to have government protection placed over it. Laura Halliday had not said what her father had discovered in the San Juan. Probably Halliday's message had not told her. But the map was important.

Whoever had stolen this from the girl also must figure her father had found something of value. And it was not a long step from theft to murder when a dusty treasure was involved. Haste was imperative. Steve was convinced of that. And he grinned with speculative approval of Laura Halliday's precautions in meeting him here. Her disguise was practically perfect. So outlandish that it was hard to believe anyone would distort their appearance this much, even to hide their identity. And in a country where women were scarce and inevitably attracted attention, the girl's make-up had been practically perfect. A man might look at her once. He was not likely to do so twice.

Downing his Saguaro Steve ordered two more, as though anger were high in him. Shuddering a little, he piled these down on top of the first he had drunk and ordered a fourth. He stirred up a mild, sullen argument with the barkeep, tried to hire one of

the tourist women to play a dusty old piano in the corner, bought a round of drinks for the house, competently and loudly cursed an anonymous stuffed shirt who didn't keep his appointment with a man who had ridden eighty miles to meet him, and left the bar.

It was a few minutes until midnight when he reached the livery. A Navajo hostler was on duty. Steve swore at him in three subtly shaded dialects for his slowness, tipped him unreasonably, and saddled up his animals himself. He had just led the horses to the main door of the barn when the two men who had been in the bar at the Hovenweep House approached. The two desert men. One of them sidled in beside the Navajo.

Suddenly, without warning, the fellow palmed a gun and rapped it down across the Indian's head. Steve pressed back against his near horse, swinging the hip on which his own gun rested a little forward. The other man had also cleared his weapon. It was lined steadily at Steve.

EASY, Duncan!" the man warned.

"Your ace," Steve conceded guardedly. "What you want?"

The man smiled. "Nothing you'll part with easily, Duncan," he said. "We've heard of you. Be a good boy, now. We want to make this quiet."

"I was just pulling out," Steve offered. The man nodded.

"Sure. Back to your camp at Firestick Creek, you see hear. But how we going to be sure? How we going to know you're not heading right out into the San Juan? And if we let you pull out, how'd we ever come up with you again out there on the slickrock? We don't figure we better take the chance. You might find old man Halliday."

Steve thought of the girl who must now be waiting in the brush west of town.

"He wired me to meet him here. He didn't show. The hell with him," he said.

"We know," the man with the gun said. "We sort of hung around in case whoever used his name in that telegram showed up. Made it easier for us that they didn't. Otherwise we'd have had two of you to handle. And you're enough for me, Duncan."

Steve grinned crookedly, asked permission with a look, and lighted a cigarette.

"Thanks," he said. The man moved in closer to him. His companion stepped to the door and flattened against it, his eyes on the street of the town. He raised his hand in a warning gesture. The man closest to Steve checked himself, standing easily on the balls of his feet.

"Too bad you're a pothunter on the side, Duncan," he said. "Too bad you figure it shouldn't be every man for himself, out in the San Juan. If you didn't, you could have had a slice of this, yourself. And it's going to make nice slicing—"

The man in the doorway made another gesture with his hand, indicating that the street was again clear. The man closest to Steve moved forward again, bringing the muzzle of his gun close to Steve's belly. A shot didn't make as much noise if it was on top of its target and the man obviously wanted quiet. But he made a mistake. He was a little too close.

Steve's hand, with a cigarette between the fingers, snapped backward, brushing the coal across the gaskin of the horse behind him. Startled, the animal surged a little, flinging Steve forward. His other hand chopped downward across the barrel of the gun, so that the shot which belched from it drove into the floor. Piling his whole weight into a twisting turn, Steve tore the weapon from the man's hand and drove the muzzle lance-like into the fellow's face.

And as the man sagged away, Steve fired the gun once, a thin, quick shot at the guard in the doorway. He pulled a little too close and ripped a pick-handle of torn wood from the framing. This slammed into the man beyond, blinding and stunning him. Steve flung the gun across the floor, where it skidded under a loose mound of straw. Bunching his shying led horses, Steve swung up into his own saddle and rode out the door of the livery.

The two shots had echoed through the town. Doors were opening, bright orange squares against the darkness of the night. Steve let his animals out, reaching for the desert. Pursuit was inevitable. He hoped only that it would not be in leather too soon.

A quarter of a mile out on the trail, a figure suddenly appeared ahead. A trim Steve loosed the saddle horse he had been leading. Laura Halliday caught the animal as it came by, hooked the pommel of the

saddle, and swung up. They rode on together, the two pack horses trailing, without a break in the run at which Steve had ridden out of Desert Center.

The girl's greeting was three words: "You all right?"

At Steve's nod, she lifted the pace of her horse and the Center vanished behind them as they topped the first slow roll of the long swells by which the desert country rose toward the Colorado, the San Juan, and the distant, unmarked mesas of the Triangle.

Chapter II

THE KEY TO HELL'S GATE

BECAUSE Laura Halliday had communicated her own fears and impatience to Steve, speed seemed more important than a cautious approach. He went directly into the San Juan triangle by way of Goulding's and made the ford of the river at Clay Hills Crossing.

A Navajo family was encamped here. From them he learned that a large party was ahead of them. Sam McKesson was in charge and from the description of individuals, Steve thought it was likely the party which had offered him a hundred-dollar-a-day fee. He was tempted for a moment to overhaul them with the idea of getting reinforcements, in case Lucien Halliday faced something near the Four Corners which was too big for the girl and himself to handle. He abandoned this idea for several reasons.

In the first place, if the stolen map at Albuquerque, the attack by the two slick-rock men in the livery at Desert Center, and the uneasiness raised in his daughter by Halliday's cryptic notes from the San Juan did not add together—if the professor was in no danger—McKesson's charge for being warped from his route would put Halliday and Steve, himself, both out of business.

Secondly, if Halliday had discovered something in the wilderness of the Triangle, McKesson would want a part of it and there would be trouble for this reason.

Finally, Sam McKesson was not the best guide available along the San Juan. He had swung far into the north to avoid the Gooseneck country and to find better going. Steve thought it would take a full extra day to follow the detour he was taking. The

best bet was to strike eastward along the river, itself. A man could get through if he knew the way.

They were two days to Goulding's, another across the river, and two more rimming the Goosenecks to Comb Creek. Here Steve left the course of the San Juan proper and cut across incredibly tumbled and eroded slickrock in a northeasterly direction behind Bluff, heading for the upper reaches of the Montezuma Fork of the San Juan.

Several times he tried to pin Laura Halliday down on the location pin-pointed on her father's map. The girl shrugged his queries away, indicating she was uncertain—that she hadn't had time to study the map carefully before it was stolen and that it had been a crude and hasty job, anyway, done by her father with an idea of amusing her.

Steve had not been satisfied with her indefiniteness, but it was not until they reached the Montezuma Fork that Steve came to the conclusion the girl was lying to him.

The last day in had been bad. Away from stream beds, they had suffered for lack of water. It had been mercilessly hot, the kind of heat which seemed to be magnified in reflection by the windworn, glassy rock underfoot. With only two pack animals, they had been unable to carry much feed and the animals were in need of graze. Saddle weariness lay across both Steve and the girl. They came down a miserable chimney, leading their horses, and finally reached the floor of the Montezuma. Almost directly across from them, under the overhang of a heavy caprock, a small ruin lay in its ancient dust.

Steve unsaddled the animals, set camp, and left Laura to do something about food while he crossed the creek and climbed up to the ruin. He had seen it once before.

Small, but untouched. He had wanted to open it, himself. And he hoped that Lucien Halliday, drifting through the country, had come on it. Signs of working might indicate they were close to the archeologist. However, the dust on the uncut, unmortared stones was undisturbed. The fallen vigas had not been touched. He returned to camp.

Laura had been swimming in the creek in his absence. Her hair hung damply and her skin was aglow with the sheen water puts on those who like to swim. Steve

watched her as she moved about the fire. And as he watched, the solitude of the bleak, unmarked country about them closed in on him. Lucien Halliday did not seem very important. The ruins of the ancients did not seem very important. Lucien Halliday was an old man, devoted to rooting in dust and the ruins had been dead a long time.

This girl seemed important. He rose from the rock on which he had been sitting and crossed idly to her. She turned suddenly, looked into his face, and straightened. He thought there was a little fear in her eyes, but not much. He thought there was calculation, also. He ignored this, reaching for her shoulders.

She came against him, smiling a little. She tilted her head back without protest when he lifted her chin. Her lips were warm, soft. Steve's arms tightened slowly. Then suddenly she was fighting him—savagely, with apparent anger. Surprised, Steve released her.

"Is that part of a packer's contract, Steve Duncan?" she asked raggedly.

Steve blinked. There had been none of the relation of employer and employee between them. In fact, he had not even discussed a fee for the trip with her. They had been a couple of people united by a common concern for her father—Laura out of love and Steve out of respect. Now it was something else. For a moment Steve did not understand. Then he seized her arm again, roughly.

"You're afraid!" he said in astonishment. "You little fool, you're afraid of me. That's why you haven't told me where your father was when he sent you his last note. That's why you don't tell me the location on that map. And that's why just now you tried to bait me—why you tried to feed me a little sugar before taking the sack away. So I'd follow you like a pack-mule, so I'd stick, regardless of what happened."

The girl flushed deeply for a moment, then flung her head up.

"The bait worked, didn't it, Mr. Duncan?" she said.

"Wasn't enough of it," Steve answered. "Don't know if it would work or not. Every now and then a woman gets out onto the desert. You'd be surprised. But you'd better figure close. You got any idea the kind of money a bunch that knew what they

had could split up if they uncovered and shipped out the artifacts in a really important ruin? That kind of money could buy a lot of women. It would be some kiss that could buy a man away from a share in that kind of profit—if he didn't care how dirty his money was."

The girl stared uncertainly at Steve for a moment, then her eyes brimmed. Steve didn't care for this, either. It was the same thing, only this time it was a play on his sympathies instead of his emotions. The girl was scared. She was scared to death—deathly afraid that Steve Duncan would quit her father and herself when they needed him most.

"Dad's last message wasn't much, Steve," Laura said quietly. "He never writes much. This time only that he was feeling fine, that he had found it—the big one. A ruin, I suppose. He said he needed a pack outfit and asked me to get in touch with you. The map was very crude. A chart of some fords at a place called Standing Wall. He said he thought you were the only man on the desert who knew where it was. The map was to show you which ford to take. The others were quicksand. You—you do know about the Standing Wall?"

Steve nodded slowly. The Standing Wall was in the heart of the most impenetrable country on the North American continent. The Wall itself was the fragmentary facing of a huge mesa which had long since generally weathered away, leaving behind an incredible tumble of erosions, fins, dikes, and debris. A country of sere rock, deep canyons, tortuous meanders, and little water. The gateway to hell.

"Quit worrying, Laura," he said quietly. "Your father is the most important man in the high country, as far as I am concerned. I know where he is, now. We're not too far away. And whoever stole your map will take a longer time getting to him than we will.

"If the map they have is only of the fords at the Wall, they'll have to draw fat luck to even find the old mesa before the end of the season. And Lucien Halliday is smart enough to keep out of the way of strangers when he's got a new discovery on his hands. We'll find him. Everything's going to be all right."

"I want to believe that," Laura Halliday said earnestly.

Steve saw she was not wholly convinced. He hoped she was not holding out on additional information because of distrust, but he knew of no way to further ease her mind. A man learns patience in the high desert. He thought that when they had found Lucien Halliday, Laura and himself might be able to pick up where they had left off a few minutes before, when she began fighting him.

He wanted that. There was emptiness in the high country and a man had vast hungers. She was very beautiful in the firelight.

"You try believing it," Steve told her gently. "Get some grub on that fire. It'll make it easier. I'll stake out the horses—"

THERE WAS a willow bosque and a small patch of brush grass at the end of the little bench on which he had pitched their camp. Steve momentarily ignored the horses and turned against the sandstone bluffs towering above them. He climbed swiftly for a quarter of an hour. At the end of this time he was on the rim of the Montezuma canyon. Laura's fire was a pinpoint below. And the flat, savage rock tableland across which they had travelled all afternoon was stretched out in front of him. He was thinking of Sam McKesson and his party of sportsmen. They could conceivably be in this general area. He was thinking of the two men who had been waiting for him at the livery in Desert Center. Others of the same kind could be trailing the girl and himself. In fact, if a man wasn't satisfied with Halliday's map and wanted to find the professor, the best bet would be to follow Steve Duncan. Even McKesson and Arturo Lopez, as well as most of the Navajo trackers, would agree no one knew the Triangle like Duncan.

However, the great stretch of slickrock was bare. There was no tell-tale darker silhouette on the limitless reach of dun rock. There was no smoke column against the sky. There was no tiny point of red flame, hinting a dry camp out on the mesa. Satisfied, Steve started back down the treacherous footing of the chimney toward the floor of the Montezuma canyon, ready now to tend his horses and conscious of growing hunger in him.

The shadows were waiting for him in the willows. Shadows he didn't see until it

was too late. Shadows which had been waiting so long that his spooky horses had become accustomed to them and so had begun grazing again. When he was close enough, they piled out of the brush onto him. Four men. They bore him down, making no sound themselves and striking too quickly for him to cry out. He tried to evade the driftwood alder club one of them swung, but he was pinioned. The night erupted in an explosion of silent violence within his head. The blow was hard but calculatedly not too hard. He heard a harsh voice:

"Get him tied and his shirt-tail stuffed into his mouth. But keep it quiet!"

There was grunted assent. Ropes bit at his wrists and ankles. His slackened jaw was pried open and wooly wadding was thrust into it. He lacked even volition to gag at this. The harsh voice came again:

"Take two of the horses. Leave the other two. And watch you don't leave tracks. Here, this is better—Ed, you take Duncan's boots. Wear 'em while you get the two horses off the grass. Leave his tracks."

"Want me and Spiney to go after the girl?" another man asked.

"Not now, not now!" the harsh voice answered. "Later. Don't you see the play? Keep her guessing. Let her think Duncan ran off and left her. We'll need her later. After we've started off Duncan with some of the bunch in the morning the rest of us can pick her up, like we was another party, and offer her help. She'll go along willingly, that way. And maybe she can tell us what the hell that map means."

None of it made sense to Steve. It it had been spelled out for him it would not have made sense. His head was ringing. His body had a limpness beyond his volition. He was clinging to consciousness with a stubborn, grinding effort. There was only one thing which was clear. Men's voices were like their faces. They could be remembered, once heard. And Steve realized that the harsh voice which passed orders to the others belonged to a competitor who had never been a friend. The harsh voice belonged to Sam McKesson.

DUNCAN slid into unconsciousness briefly, then roused with a clearer head to realize he was draped across a pack-saddle with little concern for his comfort.

His bonds at wrists and ankles gouged deep, slowing circulation painfully. The horse under him was moving steadily. He caught the sound of low exchanges of talk, of muted orders, the clink of steel shoes against enduring stone, and the gradually receding sound of the strong current in Montezuma Creek.

Sleep was impossible, and Steve built patterns in his mind. Sam McKesson was a known pot-pirate—a known robber of ancient ruins. It was not surprising that the man was involved in this pursuit of Lucien Halliday's new find. For a little Steve was puzzled as to how McKesson had discovered Halliday's solitary venture into the San Juan Triangle. Then this, too cleared. There were always Navajos wandering in the deep cuts. A tribal restlessness, perhaps.

As it began to grow light, he studied the men in the train of which he was now a part. Hard-bitten veterans. Two of them were McKesson's regulars. Steve knew both of them—Ed Ward and Spiney Hall. Two others were outlanders, greenhorns, already sitting their saddles with the gingerly discomfort of raw breeches. McKesson, himself, was the fifth in the party. Only five of them, when the Navajos at Clay Hills Crossing had said it was a big outfit!

Then Steve remembered McKesson's words the night before. The party would split. Part of it would go ahead with him. The balance, posing as an independent outfit, would come along behind and offer Laura Halliday aid at the moment when she would be furious and frightened, certain that Steve had deserted her.

The whole think was worked out neatly. Steve knew Laura Halliday would believe that he had decided to move in on her father to grab off a fortune of artifacts for bootleg sale to incurious museum buyers. She would think he had completely double-crossed her. She would tell the leader of the second section of Sam McKesson's party all she knew about her father's whereabouts and what he had found, believing they were friends.

Meanwhile, up ahead, Steve Duncan would be leading both parties toward the Standing Wall and Lucien Halliday's find. He could do little else. Threat of harm to the girl in the other party would be suffi-

cient to guarantee he would lead both parties without trickery. And Laura, seeing the tracks of the first party or being shown them, would believe that they were Steve Duncan's tracks, made in a hasty dash toward her father's dusty treasure. She would be assured and she would believe that the men with whom she travelled were making every effort to overtake Steve, and she would be satisfied.

In the end Lucien Halliday, his daughter, and Steve Duncan, packer, would be written off as casualties of a desert which often extracted a life for the few passages which were made across it. There would be no suspicion on the outside. And in some Eastern city, a museum would quietly open a wing devoted to a display of Pre-Columbian Indian culture. At Desert Center or Gallup or Flagstaff, Sam McKesson would bank more money than any honest packer could make in a dozen seasons.

AT BREAKFAST McKesson had his prisoner dumped from the pack horse on which he had spent the night. When his bonds were cut and the gag removed from his mouth, Steve sat on the sand of the dry breakfast ground and steadily chafed at his wrists and ankles while circulation painfully returned. He said nothing. Sam McKesson grinned.

"Halliday wrote the Smithsonian in Washington that he thought he had figured out where the big one ought to be. The headquarters' ruin. The place where all the cliff-dwellers went when they abandoned the other ruins. The answer to how they disappeared, and why."

Steve looked up but still said nothing.

McKesson continued to grin. "Thought you'd be interested, Duncan, since you're so damned much a scientist and so nasty about the odds and ends of pothunting."

"So you're guiding this Smithsonian man in to give Halliday a hand, eh?" Steve suggested drily.

McKesson laughed. "And get only a pack fee? You don't believe that, Duncan. A clerk saw the letter and got a copy of it to a buyer in the east. It looked big enough to carry on with. The buyer—fellow by the name of Emory Coslow—came out to Gallup with some professional restorers who weren't too finicky, with an idea of moving in on Halliday. He dropped one of

his boys off at Albuquerque to do a little window climbing after a map he heard the old man's daughter had gotten. And since he heard the old man wanted you to come in after him, Coslow tried to hire you away from the girl. You turned him down. That's where he was lucky. He got me."

"So Coslow and his bunch are the sports-men," Steve said savagely. "Where is he, now?"

McKesson's grin widened. "He's a sportsman, all right. That Halliday girl looks plenty sporty, even to me, and I've had enough of women. Coslow's back behind us a dozen miles with the rest of the party and that girl thinks he's an angel from heaven. Maybe you know what she thinks of you after the way you sneaked off last night and left her cooking a supper for the two of you. Coslow is doing all right."

Steve rose experimentally to his feet. "You thought running off at the mouth, Sam?"

Not quite," McKesson said easily. "The girl says the old man is under the Standing Wall, wherever that is, and that you know how to find it. She won't talk about that map yet, but she will. Give Coslow time. Meanwhile, you going to be sensible? You going to take us to this Standing Wall?"

Steve nodded. "If you can make it—any of you. It's a man's trail."

McKesson chuckled. "We'll get by. You was figuring on making it with the girl. Want to wash up? Since you're being reasonable, I reckon you can eat."

Steve had no illusions about McKesson—or about Emory Coslow, for that matter. He had heard of the man. Behind the front of a reputable dealership in curios and museum items, Coslow had had a part in his share of shady deals. The man's reputation was for securing his share of any archeological find. If a portion of an Egyptian shipment vanished enroute from Cairo, at least a few of the items would eventually show up in Coslow's warehouse.

If a party uncovered a Mayan inscription, only to find a vital portion—the key—was missing, sooner or later a Coslow salesman would hint that his company had come into possession of a Mayan fragment, and Coslow would get a fancy price for his fragment because without this key the whole inscription was worthless. Coslow was shrewd and he was hard-working. It took

a hell of a lot of scrubbing for him to keep his shirts looking clean in the face of recurrent deals like this.

Emory Coslow and McKesson were a bad pair. They could be friendly, as McKesson was now attempting to be with him. They could be helpful, as Coslow was attempting to be with Laura Halliday. But when they came back out of the San Juan country, they would bring with them only what they had gone in after—the artifacts they were certain Lucien Halliday had discovered. They would leave helpfulness and friendliness behind them. They would leave Halliday and his daughter and Steve Duncan behind them. And they would cover their tracks well.

As he ate silently among Sam McKesson's men, Steve studied the country. During the night McKesson had apparently turned his party down the Montezuma Fork toward the main canyon of the San Juan again. Southward half a dozen miles Steve could see a huge shelving of brilliant red Wingate sandstone, rent by a dark shadow which he thought marked the deep gorge in which the two streams met.

Further south and eastward, past the draw which marked the course of McElmo Creek and almost into the Four Corners, a distance-blued mesa rim lay like a knife edge along the horizon. A mesa which from this point looked no different than any of the ten thousand others which tore the skyline of this ragged country to serrated fragments. This was the Standing Wall.

It was too far distant yet for a man alone on foot to reach. Steve knew he would have to string with McKesson's party for a while, that he would have to actually lead them toward the distant mesa and Lucien Halliday in order to get close enough himself to risk a breakaway in an attempt to warn Halliday and keep them from reaching the professor.

Also, he had to think about Halliday's daughter. Out here in the Triangle, laws and ethics did not exist. There was only sun and slickrock, silence and dust. Coslow and McKesson did not intend to bring the girl back out with them. Coslow would be under no restraint with her. Her life was not in danger—yet—but she was not safe, even now, in Coslow's party.

Plans slowly formulated in Steve's mind. Plans based on the country and the limita-

tions facing him. There was much to be done, but it could not all be done at once. One thing at a time. And the first was escape for himself. Everything else depended on this.

But it was not until midmorning of the next day, when Coslow's party was occasionally visible across the sere slickrock far behind them, and the Standing Wall had become a dominant escarpment ahead, that he felt he could risk the break.

Chapter III

GHOSTS OF DEAD GODS

THE SAN JUAN, a much smaller stream without the waters of Comb, Hallett's, Montezuma, and McElmo Creeks, but as savagely turbulent as it was far downstream, ran here in a narrow, shallow canyon. Steve had been paralleling this for some time, content that he was approaching the Wall and watching the riverbed with sharp interest.

In order to secure the kind of freedom he would need in order to be of any value to Lucien Halliday or his daughter, escape from McKesson was not sufficient. He would have to disappear, completely and finally, so that there would be no pursuit. For this reason, he had angled in slowly on this shallow canyon. The Coslow section of the party, still presumably escorting Laura Halliday and attempting to overtake the party ahead of it, was still half a dozen miles behind, well out from the river, but also angling toward it.

And on the bottom of the canyon was a rush of turgid water, piling itself into huge yellow waves and a great deal of foam, as though it ran over a course obstructed thickly with rock and ledges. Merciless water, in appearance. Faking interest in a loosened pack-saddle cinch, Steve signalled a halt.

Sam McKesson immediately rode suspiciously up to him as he dismounted and bent beside the pack animal, almost on the lip of the shallow canyon, his back to the noisy water twenty feet below.

"Stalling, Duncan?" McKesson asked thinly. "Couldn't be that the mesa we've had up ahead of us all morning is the Standing Wall, could it?"

"I'll tell you when we get to the Wall,"

Steve answered, his hands on the straps.

"What makes you think you'll ever get to it?" McKesson said easily. "Just close enough so we're reasonably sure where we are. That's enough. You could be a lot of trouble, Duncan. No sense in our taking that risk. I haven't been to the Wall. You're up on me on that. But I've heard about it a time or two. Enough to have a strong notion that mesa break ahead is it. This ought to be about far enough for you. Coslow ought to have that girl about ready to tell what that map of her dad's means, now."

Steve straightened beside the pack horse and felt with his heels for good footing. He put his hands against the animal's pack for a brace. McKesson swung down. As he did so, he unhung the gun at his belt. McKesson's two men also swung down. They moved toward Steve. The two outlanders, whom Steve had now tagged as part of the excavating and restoring staff Coslow had brought with him, fixed their interest on a butte some miles distant, carefully looking away from the little group on the lip of the trench through which the San Juan was boiling.

"Right where you are is all right, Duncan," McKesson said slowly, and he eared back the hammer of his gun.

Steve thrust with his hands, then powerfully with his legs. He arched out and backward over the river. He heard a man's startled shout. He had a crazy, inverted glimpse of McKesson and his two packers, crouched on the lip of the canyon. He spread his arms and braced himself for impact.

In spite of the apparent savagery and strength of the San Juan, this far up its course it was a shallow stream and a clean dive from this height would mean ramming hard into the bottom. There would be shock, landing spread-eagled, but water was softer than rock or sand. And Steve knew a flat fell onto his back would be more spectacular, that it would help convince those above that he had fallen to certain, helpless destruction.

His landing was an unexpectedly hard jolt. Breath was hammered from his body. Yellow water closed over him. The racing current took advantage of his momentary limpness to twist him mercilessly. He remained limp, submerged, as long as he

could, then surfaced in a foam of muddy spray for a quick gulp of air. He was already rods downstream from the place at which he had jumped. Satisfaction pulsed in him.

The run of current through this notch was spectacular. But it was not the boulder-filled stretch of rapids it seemed. The bottom was sand, and aside from the violent churning of the water, there was little danger. This savagery was a phenomenon which belonged especially to the San Juan.

He surfaced again, drew more air, and let his body tumble with the waves. He was twisted, rolled, dipped recklessly. From the canyon rim, where Sam McKesson and his companions watched, he must look like a man being mauled to death by a crazy river.

Half a mile below, the river widened. Bruised, a little sand-burned, and with yellow silt thick in his eyes, his hair, his ears, and his nose, Steve Duncan rose to his feet and splashed ashore. He was careful to climb from the stream onto rocks still exposed to the full face of the sun, so that their heat would soon dry out the damp stain he left.

Moving unhurriedly but with practiced steadiness, he worked up over the slow slant of polished stone which rose back of the river. Keeping to wind-channels and other depressions which would hide his movement, he climbed steadily until he was more than a mile from the river and several hundred feet above it.

A promontory gave him a view upstream. McKesson's party was apparently moving again. It was no longer in sight on the rim of the slot. Steve thought it had probably pushed on toward the base of the Wall. Coslow's party had almost reached the river. It was so close that he could plainly make out Laura Halliday's figure, riding beside that of the leader.

Steve thought it was likely that McKesson would not permit the second part of the party to overhaul him until he had reached the Wall, probably sometime before noon the next day. He would tell Coslow and Laura a tale of how he had planned with Steve Duncan to make a clean sweep of Professor Halliday's discovery—whatever it was—in the Four Corners, but that Duncan had fallen from the trail into

the river, taking with him knowledge of Halliday's location.

McKesson would claim he had lost interest in the whole thing and was going to turn back. Then Coslow, posing as the girl's friend—a sportsman suddenly plunged into something he found exciting—would hire McKesson to join them in a push on to give the girl's father whatever help he might need.

Laura would be fooled by this. Still bitter over these further signs of Steve's own treachery, she would distrust McKesson. But she would have Coslow to lean on. She would feel indebtedness to the man. She'd stick by his decision to enlist McKesson's party. And she'd explain that Halliday's map was a guarantee that they could cross the San Juan at Standing Wall without miring themselves fatally in the merciless quicksands which were frequent along the river.

Watching Coslow and the girl approach the river, Steve was tempted to follow them. After nightfall, it might be possible to ease up and get Laura out of Coslow's camp. No one in the second party would know that Steve Duncan wasn't still leading McKesson, up ahead. There would be no intimation among them that an enemy was afoot on the desert. And without the girl, they might not relate Halliday's map to the San Juan Crossing. They might not be able to safely cross the river.

Steve abandoned the impulse reluctantly. It was too dangerous. McKesson thought Steve Duncan was dead. That had been the essence of Steve's plan. If the girl disappeared from Coslow's camp, McKesson was shrewd enough to make connections. He might realize that maybe Duncan had been harder to kill than he had thought. And Steve would be robbed of his most important weapon.

It seemed very unlikely that Laura Halliday would be in any danger, at least until Coslow and McKesson had actually found her father and learned what the professor had found in the steep canyons behind the Wall. The important thing was still to get to Halliday first, to work some device which would keep Coslow's party from reaching the ruin Halliday had found. Without a treasure of artifacts to carry back to the outside, McKesson and Coslow would neither one have much stomach

for the blistering heat and black night which lay always along the upper San Juan.

STEVE WAITED until the roll of the country hid Coslow's party from him, then started on across the siltless rock. Although he was afoot, he thought he had ample time. He had not denied McKesson's guess that the vast mesa ahead of them was the Standing Wall. But he had been leading McKesson along the rim of the San Juan canyon, and what he had not told the rival packer was that the river piled down through a series of sharply eroded meanders.

While McKesson, with Coslow behind him, was following the tortuous windings of the river, Steve cut sharply almost due east, driving for the northeastern tip of Standing Wall, thus by-passing the meanders. It was a long afternoon. For a man who did not know the extreme aridity of the air, and the brassy sun heat, doubled by reflection from bare, polished stone, it would have been merciless. But Steve moved steadily.

In late afternoon he turned down a long knife-ridge of stone and reached the river again at the head of the meanders. Across the San Juan, the Wall towered from a talus-strewn base a thousand feet sheerly upward—a tremendous monolith of sandstone, capped by a harder rock, and shading from a lusterless obsidian through a hundred colors to an unreal, flaming vermillion.

Starting to ford the river, he stepped almost at once into treacherous, unstable quicksand. Flinging himself down, he worked his feet free and swam clumsily across in the two feet of water flowing at the ford, more crawling than swimming, but putting no weight on the sand. On the far bank, he moved carefully, looking for sign.

Halliday had been here. Obviously, he was up one of the canyons which split the Wall. To choose one and choose rightly the first time was the problem.

He forded the little stream and moved on to a canyon. It was wider than the others, with more precipitous walls, and it choked down to a narrow, slot-like passage three hundred yards away from the place where it left the mesa.

Three miles above the slotted, narrow opening, another canyon came in from the

left, and where the two met, there was a semi-circular amphitheater a mile across. It was a place where the evenness of the floor and the growth of thick grass gave positive proof that it had once been carefully cultivated. And at each of the three points where the surrounding walls were split there stood round stone guard towers. In enormous caverns in the towering walls, tier on tier, were square, viga-shaped buildings.

All this was positive proof that something ancient and important had long slept here—like Mesa Verde, but dwarfing even Cliff Palace in size; like Taos Pueblo, but architecturally more beautiful, and bigger.

Excitement choked Steve. He was glad Lucian Halliday had found this place. Thrusting a bent forefinger between his teeth, Steve whistled. The whistle rocketed against the canyon walls and came back in a variety of echoes, warped by the caverns, the walls of the ruins, the rock, itself. Only the echoes answered. He doubled back to the getaway into the valley. A belt of clay-crust sand lay across this, firm enough to retain a print a long time in the dry season. Only his own tracks crossed it.

Slowly Steve looked again at the caverns and the ruins. His was the first look. Halliday had not been here.

STEVE hunkered down in the shade of a stone guard-tower. Halliday had camped on the San Juan at the base of the wall. Steve was certain of the sign there. But he had not come up this canyon—at least, not to this amphitheatre. He had, then, gone up a neighboring canyon.

Steve glanced at the sun. It was minutes above the western rim of the amphitheater. Estimating McKesson's progress during the afternoon and the certain union of McKesson's party with Coslow's either after dark or early the next morning, there was too much risk of discovery to double back down to the San Juan and the face of the wall to try another of the dry canyons joining the river there.

Quitting the slanting shade, Steve started a circuit of the amphitheater. It was almost full dark when he completed it, returning to the guard-tower at which he had begun. The canyon walls were sheer. There was no passage at the back of any of the caves. The route back to the San Juan seemed the

only one available, and he silently cursed the further delay his search had caused.

And there was an additional struggle in him, now. The ruins which he had skirted were incredibly rich in artifacts. Kivas were still roofed. Walls were intact. There were skin hangings and fine wickerwork in salvageable condition. Pottery was abundant. Storerooms still contained dusty grain. There were utensils and personal articles in profusion.

This hollow in the heart of Standing Wall was a greater treasure than he had imagined would ever be found.

There was the obligation to Lucien Halliday which had drawn him into the San Juan Triangle in the first place, the obligation to protect these ruins until men of Halliday's caliber could conduct the survey and excavation of them. This dual burden made a decision hard, particularly when the streak of practicality which had made Steve Duncan the best packer on the slickrock kept reminding him that he wasn't one of the ancient gods. Whichever responsibility bore heaviest upon him, he would be wrong in slighting the other.

It was thought of Laura Halliday that finally shaped his decision. He had not seen Emory Coslow, but he hadn't liked the way McKesson had talked about Coslow—and the girl.

Rising, Steve crawled through the narrow, low arch of the entrance to the guard tower at his back. This tower was the place to leave a message. However, when Steve straightened within the tower, the message he had intended to scratch on the wall left his mind. This was not the usual structure of the ancients at a pass or entry. It did not have an earth floor. Instead, it was rubble on vigas, on poles, and beneath it was another chamber, perhaps a kiva.

Steve prowled the walls and found a crude rack on which bundles of faggots had once been hung. There were yet a number of crude torches. He lifted three of these down, raked a small quantity of dry bark flakings and rubble together, and fired them. The first of the faggots caught from this flame. With this murky light, Steve lowered himself through the square opening of the tower floor, and as he went down through this, he became conscious of a strong, steady draft of cool air.

The subterranean room was astonishing.

It had the regular form of a ceremonial kiva—the benches, the fire-bowl in its center, the smoke-blackened vigas above. But against one wall, where there was usually a *sipapu*—a shallow excavation used as a symbol of the gateway to the underworld—there was an actual passage, looking almost too small for the passage of a man's body, and from this issued the cool draft he had noticed above.

Also, there was an increasing odor of mustiness, of time and dust. Thrusting his torch before him, he crawled into this passage.

It had been carved from the soft sandstone. The passage suddenly swelled, widening into a natural fissure or cavern, and the thin, smoky light of his torch failed to reach the limits of the darkness about him.

The general slant of the cavern was downward, at an easy pitch. In twenty minutes he thought he had gone a full third of a mile, and in one constant direction. At this point the cavern walls which had alternately been opening and closing in on him, suddenly receded to the limits of a huge chamber. He came to a series of low stone walls. There was dust and rubble in these bins. There was also corn, unhusked and unshelled. There was one which contained the fragile, dust-dry sheets of untanned animal skins.

And another was an incredible arsenal. It contained hundreds of the short, stiff arrows which the ancients had used with their throwing-sticks. Weapons which lacked the range and perhaps the accuracy of the bow, but which had much greater striking power because of their weight. Steve lifted an arrow and found the wrapping which held the stone head to the shaft was still tight and sound. He collected a group of them—they might come in handy as a sort of defense.

Ten minutes later, he smelled a freshening of the air and a diffusion of light appeared ahead. A rod farther on, he heard voices, flattened and distorted beyond recognition by the shape of the cavern.

The ancients had not been forced to any of the tunneling at this end that they had employed under the guard tower. The cavern narrowed naturally to a fissure which slanted suddenly upward. Steve crawled up this, saw light, and beat out his torch. At

the end of the fissure, he wriggled upward into a shallow shelf behind a low parapet nicked into a stone cliff-face.

ALMOST DIRECTLY below him, where a thin stream washed along the base of the rock, a camp was making. Packs were on the ground, partially opened, and tents were going up. In rapid succession Steve located McKesson, Laura, and a man he was certain was Emory Coslow. For an instant he felt relief. Halliday wasn't here. They hadn't found him. Then he saw the old man.

Supper fires had been lighted, two of them. Lucien Halliday was hunkered down midway between them, almost in the center of the partially erected camp. His head, crowned with a thick, disshevelled shock of white hair, pivoted a little as his glance shifted from his daughter and Coslow to Sam McKesson. Laura was standing beside Coslow. She was whitefaced but contained. McKesson was across the nearest fires from the two of them. One of McKesson's handlers stood close to Sam. At this man's feet were half a dozen fine pottery ollas, obviously already rifled from the ruins.

The whole scene was fully in front of Steve and a scant rod from his hiding place on the cliff wall. He realized he had broken into the middle of something. Laura Halliday spoke sharply.

"We've got to be reasonable, dad," she said. "We can't expect these men to give you their time and help and animals. They'll have to have something. You expected to pay Steve Duncan. And look what it turns out: he really wanted—everything. Mr. Coslow and McKesson only want a fair part. You get full credit for this discovery. You get half of the items dug out. And you direct the excavations. That's better than nothing!"

Steve saw that Laura was frightened. Her arguments rang shrilly. She was desperately trying to save her father from what she knew would be a dangerous mistake with Coslow and McKesson. Steve swore. The trouble was, she believed that Coslow and McKesson would let her father have half of what was taken from these ruins. She believed they would eventually help Halliday and herself get back across the high desert with their share of the

valuable findings—back to Albuquerque.

Halliday's head swung sharply.

"No!" he said. The single word, terse and angry.

McKesson shrugged and spoke to the man beside him.

"The professor's being stubborn. We can't take out more than half the stuff in this canyon. Too much for our animals, and if it went on the market, it would flood out the buyers and drop prices too far. Pick out the best jug in that bunch—that one there—Spiney. You know what to do with the rest. Show Halliday how we'll do our digging."

The man to whom McKesson had spoken carefully moved the selected olla to one side. Then with a malicious grin at Halliday, swung his capped boot in methodical rhythm and shattered each of the others. The ancient pottery fractured with a thin, high sound and a little dust rose in a puff after each kick from the shards. Lucien Halliday shrank with each kick as though the punishment was directed against his own body.

"No!" he said.

Emory Coslow, his face reddened by the unaccustomed sun through which he had been riding in recent days, stepped away from Laura and frowned down at her father.

"You're stubborn," he said. "We're not going to waste time with you, Halliday. This is our party. Your daughter was thinking of you. I suggest you think of her!"

Halliday looked across at Laura. Her face had whitened at the sudden realization of what lay behind Emory Coslow's words. She had thought the Eastern man perhaps greedy, but a friend. He had, after all, come along when Steve deserted her on the San Juan, and he had brought her this far. Now she began to see why, and what had been fear became a rising, tightly-gripping terror. This was in her face and Steve saw it.

"You're not animals—quite," Lucien Halliday said softly, a strong, acid scorn in his voice. "You walk on your hind legs. You're primates. There has to be a vestige of decency in you, somewhere. This valley belongs to the whole world—for whatever addition to knowledge can be found in it. In principle, the fate of one individual or

two or a dozen can't weigh against it. It's a very hard thing to bluff an old man, Coslow!"

Emory Coslow pivoted sharply, seized Laura, and kissed her with a grinding savagery, like an animal. It was insult. Lucien Halliday shot to his feet with a startlingly splendid oath and lunged at the man. One of Coslow's party stepped forward and hit Halliday mercilessly in the belly as he passed. The old man staggered a few steps and plowed into the sand on his face. Coslow released the girl and watched Halliday come slowly to his feet.

White, sick, trembling with an anger almost too great for his thin body to contain, Halliday spoke:

"All right," he panted. "Your terms, Coslow. But stick to the game the way it's agreed. Touch Laura again and I'll kill you! And one other thing—be careful with what you handle here. Old gods sleep in this dust. Dangerous gods—"

Steve sank slowly back down on his narrow shelf. He had not realized how close he had come to vaulting down into the camp under him. There was something thin and hopeless in Halliday's talk of old gods. Then, suddenly, the words stirred a thought in Steve Duncan's mind. He was one against too many, there on the floor of the canyon. He had desperately needed a plan. Now he had one. Lucien Halliday had given it to him.

Chapter IV

CAVERN TO THE UNDERWORLD

STEVE remained on the shelf above the Coslow-McKesson camp for a few minutes. Laura Halliday and her father moved apart, huddled close together and talking uneasily. McKesson's packers and the men Coslow had brought up the San Juan with him worked unhurriedly at completion of the camp layout and preparation of a meal. Heavy twilight lowered over the slotted canyon. Steve felt hunger rising in him, but he ignored the growling of his belly. His mind worked steadily, reasoning out the things he had to know concerning the camp below him.

He thought there was little immediate danger to Halliday. McKesson and Emory Coslow needed the old scientist's skill in

excavation and his interpretation of the value of individual objects as they were removed from the ruins.

He thought, also, that Laura would not be disturbed, so long as she used judgment and did not give Coslow either opportunity or encouragement. But he wasn't sure. It occasionally happened that a man from the East, with the free air of the desert in his lungs, curiously cast off all the restraints of civilization. It was as though the desert air intoxicated them.

It was apparent to him, too, that the shading of the rock wall above the camp and its proximity to the place McKesson and Coslow had chosen, provided effective camouflage for the narrow shelf. It seemed likely that if his own movements did not call attention to the cliff face, the shelf and the mouth of the cavern would remain undiscovered by those below. And a short length of rope or something of a similar nature would give him easy access to the canyon floor.

Satisfied with these things, Steve worked back into the fissure and down to the floor of the cavern. He had a busy night ahead and he needed a little more equipment. He found that pulling the tail of his shirt out a little in back and dropping the arrows and the throwing-stick butt-first down under his collar, he had a suitable way of carrying them which left his hands free. But he could find nothing which would serve as a rope. He'd have to make a jump, going down, and McKesson's camp would have to provide a means of getting back up.

After the torch went out, he crouched in the darkness within the mouth of the fissure, watching the stars move across the opening above him. When he judged the hour was close to midnight he wormed again out onto the ledge. The tents were up. A small one he thought might be occupied by Laura Halliday and perhaps by her father. A larger one which obviously belonged to Coslow and his men. And a tarp on poles to one side of the cooking area. A sunshade for meals and lounging in the day time. McKesson and his packers, with the carelessness of desert men, were bunked in the open on the sand.

However, McKesson was being cautious. One of the fires was still fuelled and a man sat beside it. Steve found a crevice in the rock of the shelf, almost in the mouth of

the fissure. Working carefully, he jammed the third pitch faggot he had brought from the watch-tower in the other canyon into this in such a way that it projected above the floor of the shelf a little and seemed firmly fixed.

He lowered himself carefully over the little parapet screening the shelf, hung by his hands for a moment, and loosened his grip. His body shot down the nearly vertical rock face with a swift, rasping whisper of sound and he landed at the bottom of his fifteen-foot fall with a soft, thudding impact. The man at the fire stiffened and swung his head sharply. Steve crouched where he had landed, motionless. The man at the fire was a long time in losing his stiffness.

Steve thought the unnatural silence of the canyon and the now invisible ruins of an ancient city in the walls frayed a little on the man's nerves. There was a mysterious quality about things which antedated history—a mysterious quality about the desert—a mysterious quality about unknown regions such as this—which worked on a man's nerves. Steve was counting on that as he was counting on Lucien Halliday's edgeless promise that old and dangerous gods slept in the dust of this canyon.

When the guard relaxed again at the fire, Steve moved. He tried a few steps, belatedly remembered something, and removed his boots and socks. The sandy footing was too general to hope to move without leaving tracks. The trick was then to leave many, so completely interlaced, that following them to their source was impossible. And the tracks could not be of booted feet. They had to be bare.

A coil of rope hung from one of the poles supporting the cooking awning. Steve circled and retracked several times, then moved toward this. It was within half a dozen yards of the fire and the man sitting beside it. The man was too wakeful for him to reach it unnoticed. Steve reached the throwing-stick and an arrow from the back of his shirt and hoped the passable skill he had acquired two years ago as an experiment had not left him. Gripping the handle of the stick, he set the butt of the arrow in the notch at its end, the shaft lying back along the stick and the stone head resting across his hand where he could steady it in position with a finger.

The man at the fire seemed to sense

rather than see or hear him. He stiffened again without warning, climbed awkwardly to his feet, and began a pawing motion toward his belted gun. At the same time, his eyes knifed through a semicircle about the camp, swept past Steve, then cut back to focus on him. The man's face tightened and the reach for the gun became frantically hasty. At the same time, his head tilted up a little as though he intended to cry out.

Steve swung the throwing-stick as a man would the haft of a bull-whip. At the peak of the forward-downward swing, his finger released the head of the arrow in the instant when it was pointed full at the man. It was like throwing a short, light spear, only that the throwing stick lengthened a man's arm and gave the whole motion multiplied speed and power.

It was a good throw. The arrow whistled softly across the space between them and struck the man's chest with a slight, resonant sound. Almost all of the short shaft entered his body. He made a strained, barely audible coughing sound, turned quaterly with his hands digging at his shirt-front, and fell face downward. The head of the arrow protruded from between his shoulder blades.

Steve snagged the coil of rope from the awning pole and ducked swiftly back into the shadows. The camp continued to sleep. After a few moments, he came back into the camp area and circled aimlessly, walking backward and forward, until his tracks were confusion. He walked out to the grass where the animals were staked and onto this, then walked backward to the camp. He did this three times. Satisfied, he returned to the base of the wall, certain that it would now look as though he had come down the canyon, across the grass, and that he had had two companions, one of whom had walked to the base of the cliff and returned.

Going back to the cliff, he made a noose, cast upward, and failed to snag the stout faggot he had jammed in a crevice on the shelf behind the parapet. It took seven casts to make the rope fast enough for him to risk his weight on it. He climbed to the shelf, made the knot about the faggot more secure, and slid to the canyon floor again. Walking over his earlier prints, muddling them more, he circled the camp and went out to the horses. They tolerated him

among them without alarm. Grinning a little, he moved toward the small tent. Lucien Halliday's ancient gods were getting in a good night of work.

THE EARLY moon had now fully set. Untended, the remaining fire in camp had dulled down nearly to embers. The canyon was as dark as the cave through which Steve had come in the afternoon. Risking a chance awakening by McKesson or one of his men sleeping in the open, Steve parted the flap of the small tent.

He had guessed rightly. The smell of Laura's perfume came from inside, and he could hear the slightly asthmatic breathing of her father. Circling the tent, he stretched out on the ground beside its sidewall on Halliday's side and commenced a persistent scratching against the canvas. After an interminable time, he heard the man on the cot inside stir.

"Halliday?" he whispered almost silently.

"Yes?" The professor's answer came querulously and a little too loud.

"Quiet!" Steve cautioned silently. "Wake Laura and make her keep quiet, too. Then listen."

Halliday stirred again. Laura's awakening was a faint murmur. Finally Halliday scratched on the canvas.

"This is Duncan," Steve said softly. "Don't ask how I got here. I'm going to try getting you out. Dress. When you're both ready, scratch again. We'll take the horses. If we get separated or something happens, ride hard for the San Juan and double back up the next canyon in the face of Standing Wall. There's a bigger ruin there. Quit the horses and hole up in a cave off of a kiva under the watch-tower at the entrance. You'll be safe there. Understand?"

Halliday scratched again. Steve rose slowly to his feet and moved back to the front of the tent, from which he could watch McKesson and his sleeping packers. In the faint light of the dying fire the dead man looked as though he only slept carelessly. In an incredibly short time, Halliday scratched again within the tent and Steve lifted the flap.

Laura came out first, her eyes wide with uncertainty. She glanced quickly at Steve as though making sure he was actually here instead of at the bottom of the San

Juan. He grinned briefly at her. There was no answering smile. He knew she still did not trust him. Halliday followed her. He had not put on his shoes or shirt. He bent close to Steve, his lips to his ear.

"Take Laura. Got to leave me. Make things look right. Both of us go and it won't. You two head for help. I can hold out."

"Help's too far," Steve answered sibilantly. "Think you're right, though. Maybe you'd better stay. We'll work on them with ghosts—if you'll give us a hand."

Halliday looked questioningly. Steve turned a little so that the man could see the arrows and throwing-stick thrusting up under his collar, and he tipped his head toward the dead man by the fire. A swift, wicked grin touched Halliday's thin lips.

"Better!" he said. "Much better. Good-bye, Laura—good luck, Duncan—"

He turned back into the tent. Steve seized Laura's arm and started her toward the horses. They had gone a dozen steps when a man rolled over, grunted, and sat up sleepily. Steve pushed the girl on toward the horses and wheeled, crouching a little. One of McKesson's packers was rousing. He crawled out of his blankets with a nice concern for his sleeping companions and started toward the embers of the dying fire, boots in hand. Steve realized, then, that he was relief man for the dead guard. He unhung another arrow and set it in the notch of the throwing-stick.

The man approached the fire sleepily and almost stumbled over his dead companion. Behind him Steve could hear faint movement among the horses. He hoped Laura understood what she could do there. The relief seemed suddenly to understand something was wrong, straightening to full height, staring down at the man almost under his feet.

Steve did not make his cast until the fellow dropped his boots. And the distance was greater. He did not make as good a cast as he had the first time. He thought the arrow took the man through the thigh. The fellow howled in sudden agony and spilled into the sand. His cursing brought Sam McKesson and another packer up to their feet and men poured out of Coslow's tent.

Steve turned and sprinted for the horses. As he did so, the horses started moving.

Laura was up on one and was hazing the others. He caught a mane as they came by and swung up. In the excitement and the dark, he knew the men at the fire would not be able to see the figures clearly.

McKesson had no good horses, but since the only possible pursuit could be afoot, Steve was content. He worked up beside Laura Halliday. She turned, tried to talk with him, but he gestured her to silence. They rode roughly down the canyon and came out on the slickrock at the edge of the San Juan. Steve kept back far enough to avoid the tell-tale sand along the bank of the river and cut upstream toward the canyon he had discovered. They piled into this and hammered up its length and through the pass by the guard tower. Steve flung down here, hazing the horses on into the widened valley.

"Root up some of that brush and drag those poles into a barricade to keep the horses in," he told Laura Halliday swiftly. "There's good graze in here. It won't take much to hold them. Then climb into that tower and down into the kiva. There's faggots in the tower. Here's some matches. Light yourself a torch and climb into the cave beyond the kiva."

Turning, he dived into the tower, grabbed one of the crude knot torches, and coaxed it afire. He wormed into the short tunnel which led from the kiva into the cavern. With room, he straightened and ran raggedly. The way seemed much longer, this time. And in his mind's eye was the rope he had left dangling carelessly from the mouth of the fissure at the other end down the cliff-face behind McKesson's camp. He passed the storage bins and finally raced up the slope of the fissure. Abandoning his light, he scrambled out onto the ledge.

THE ENTIRE camp below was in turmoil. White gasoline light was brilliant in the darkness as men examined the tracks he had left, and the body of the dead man by the fire. The second man he had hit had apparently been moved to the big tent.

Sam McKesson, his big head thrust doubtfully forward, was striding uneasily about. Coslow was quieter, his eyes searching the night. Lucien Halliday stood a little apart, smiling faintly. And the rope still hung down the cliff-face, undiscovered. Steve snaked it hurriedly up. McKesson

approached Halliday and stopped angrily in front of him.

"The girl could have done it," he said. "You helped her!"

"Sure," Halliday agreed. "I made some arrows a thousand years old and used them. I killed one man and wounded another while you slept thirty feet away. I'm not dead yet, McKesson, and this is the work of ghosts. You know it."

Coslow had come up. "Ghosts!" he snapped. "Somebody else is in here with us!"

"That's exactly what I mean," Halliday agreed quietly. "These are unexplored ruins. I have reason to believe this is where all of the cliff-dwellers gathered when their other cities became uninhabitable. Are we so sure that they are an extinct race?"

Coslow's mouth sagged open a little. "Indians—?" he breathed unbelievably.

"Unless you like the word ghosts better," Halliday smiled.

McKesson's remaining packer and the boss-packer himself, all of them wise in desert ways, paled a little. Nothing was impossible on the San Juan. Watching, Steve felt a surge of admiration for Lucien Halliday's cool play upon their credulity. Only Coslow was stubborn.

"This place is dead!" he said flatly.

"So is Spiney, there," McKesson growled. "I wasn't buying a piece of something like this when I agreed to come in here with you. Neither were the boys—" he broke off, then added: "Two messed up at the Hovenweep by Duncan, and now Spiney dead and Ed with a hole in his leg."

"Shut up!" Coslow snapped. "We're being tricked. We—"

His head had been tilted blindly toward Steve's ledge. Suddenly he broke off. Too late, Steve realized what had made him do so. From the fissure came the sound of frantic sobbing and scurrying movement. And with these came light. Light which glowed above him and must glow on the face of the cliff. Light which Coslow had seen.

Laura Halliday, in blindness of terror, was crawling up the fissure, still carrying her smoky torch with her.

Steve slid into the fissure and dropped down toward her. He knew Coslow would order his party to investigate. The cavern would be discovered; his hand would be

forced too soon. But it couldn't be helped, now. And he had to do something about the stark terror in Laura Halliday's eyes.

Chapter V

CHAMBER OF THE UNBURIED

THE GIRL was on the verge of collapse when Steve reached her. She seized him desperately, as though deathly afraid he would leave her again. She pressed frantically against him. It was long moments before he could quiet her sobs, later still before he drew out of her what had happened.

"I was following the track you told me about," she said. "Back in the middle of the cave. But I must have got off of it. Suddenly I was in a sort of side-room, with queer painting on the floor. I was looking at this and still moving along when I happened to look up—" She shivered uncontrollably. "Steve! There are hundreds of them, maybe thousands. All sitting the same way on stone shelves. All bent a little forward. All looking down. All—"

Laura choked and couldn't go on. Steve steadied her. "Hundreds of what?"

"Dead men," she said. "Mummies."

Steve glanced at the head of the fissure. It would be but minutes until Coslow found a way to get his men and his gasoline lanterns onto the shelf. He was convinced this was all trickery. He would drive his men into the cavern to prove it. Laura's discovery offered him a hope.

"If I go with you, can you go back?" he asked the girl.

"Will it help if I do?"

Steve nodded. The girl's lips tightened. She rose to her feet. They started back through the cavern. Steve found the place where she had come back onto the main track. Her footprints were faintly visible in the dust. He took Laura's torch and rekindled his own, setting one of them between a couple of stones at this point as a marker.

They moved up the side chamber, apparently a highly vaulted affair, since light did not reach the roof and their footfalls echoed and reechoed with a peculiar multiplying effect, so that they seemed to be marching with an army. Presently the torchlight fell on the first of the shelves Laura had seen.

The chamber was in fact a huge mauso-

leum. There were hundreds of fabric-wrapped burials, most of them in a doubled up, sitting posture. The archeological find of the century—and a way to break Emory Coslow. Maybe a way that would work—if Lucien Halliday recognized the game.

Steve planted his remaining torch in the center of the chamber's floor. Leading Laura to the nearest of the tiers which held the mummies, he pointed upward.

"We've got to get up from the floor, as high as we can. We'll be out of the light that way. And the echoes should be better. Do just what I do. If I make a sound, try to make it with me. But don't speak a recognizable word."

The girl nodded dumbly, averting her eyes from the nearest of the mummies. Steve worked onto the first shelf, lifted her after him, and climbed the second. There seemed to be four tiers. He stopped when they were at the top. In the silence which followed they could hear movement along the way they had come. Movement and guarded voices. Finally, beyond the murky red torch, they caught a rising glow of white light from the gasoline lanterns. Steve gripped Laura Halliday's hand.

Lucien Halliday was in the lead, obviously by order. McKesson and his one packer. Behind them were Coslow's four men. In the rear was Coslow, himself. He carried guns in either hand. Two more were thrust in his belt. The rest of the party were unarmed. Apparently Coslow was taking no chances. He was going to be sure that his party listened to him instead of the ghosts at which Halliday had hinted.

McKesson and the Coslow men eyed the torch on the middle of the floor with uneasy interest. Coslow ignored it. But when the first of them raised their eyes and saw the tiers of burials, his cry jerked Coslow's body like a blow and the man paled perceptibly.

"Mummies!" he said after a moment. "Dead Indians! I told you this place was dead, all of it, Halliday. What kind of a trick is this?"

"You're sure they're all dead?" Halliday asked. On the fourth tier, out of range of the gasoline lights, Steve Duncan grinned. Lucien Halliday was a quick man.

"Find out!" Coslow snapped challengingly. "Talk to them. If they're alive, they'll answer."

THE SECRET OF SKELETON CANYON

"Or start punching arrows through our eyes!" McKesson growled. Coslow wheeled on him.

"I told you to shut up, Sam!" he said thinly. Turning back to Halliday, he barked an order. "Talk!"

"In what?" Halliday answered. "We don't have the vaguest idea of what the ancient language was."

"Use Navajo," Coslow said. "If there are Indians in here, they'll be that modern. Quit stalling, Halliday!"

The professor shrugged. He raised his voice suddenly into the peculiar whanging resonance of the Navajo tongue. Echoes immediately rolled down on him. Echoes which dinned out his words, so that Steve could not tell what he said. When he stopped, Steve began a high-pitched, meaningless chant. Laura joined him and their voices swelled with the echoes into a huge chorus, their nearness to the roof seeming to enhance the effect of multiplication.

SAM MCKESSON rolled his eyes widely. The packer with him, holding one of the lanterns, turned and tripped as he did so. He sprawled clumsily and the lantern spilled onto the stone of the floor, snuffing itself with an angry hiss of escaping air through its shattered mantles and displaced generator. Emory Coslow wheeled in a hurry and kicked at the fallen man with a sharp oath. Then he pivoted back to Halliday.

The man was sudden. Steve had no chance for a word to Laura. He had only time to drive powerfully with his knees, send his body in a long, arching dive outward from the tier on which he crouched. That and time for a wild, animal like shout in mid-air.

The man with the second lantern—one of Coslow's own men, glanced upward as Steve's body came hurtling down. He started a frantic turn. Coslow's face shifted sharply upward. One of Steve's knees struck it dead center. The man with the lantern took a running step and tripped over Lucien Halliday's outstretched foot.

He went down onto the painted stone floor, scouring up the dusty pigment of the old ceremonial patterns at the same instant that Steve carried Emory Coslow down with him. The second lantern shattered on

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the stone, ruptured its tank. Flame and gasoline ran swiftly over a wide area. McKesson and his packer and Coslow's diggers dodged the flame frantically as Steve rolled clear of Coslow's body and came to his feet with the man's gun in his hand, a little sick at the sound Coslow's head had made between his knee and the stone of the floor. Light from the flame touched his face and Sam McKesson swore raggedly.

"Duncan!"

"Right where we started from, Sam," Steve agreed. "With me in the saddle, now. You take it easy."

Sam McKesson scrubbed a trembling hand across his face. "Like a whisper, Duncan," he said. "Only get me outside, in a hurry. I've had enough of this!"

Steve shook his head. "Professor Halliday's got a lot of work to do here. He's going to have help—your help and the help of these other boys. If he doesn't get it, the lot of you are going to stay here permanently."

McKesson nodded slowly. "We'll sell cheap. This is really a find. We want out, any way we can get out."

Steve grinned without humor, bent, and lifted the two extra guns from Coslow's belt. He handed them to Lucien Halliday.

Lucien Halliday smiled and clumsily tried to spin one of the guns on a bony index finger. Relief eased McKesson's face. And in this instant, a new bedlam of piercing echoes rolled down from the vaulted ceiling.

Steve wheeled, recognizing his own name in the tumult and knowing that the echoes had built up something which had begun as only a small cry. He reached up and caught Laura Halliday as she reached the lower tier, swinging her to the floor. But he did not free her and she clung to him.

"Steve!" she breathed in his ear. "Steve! Steve, I haven't had time to tell you—I'm—Steve, I'm sorry for what I thought, what I said—I'm—I'm glad you didn't drown!"

Steve smiled. Her body was pressed against him.

"So am I," he answered. "I'd have missed the discovery of the century."

"The ruins—" she murmured.

"You," he said flatly. And he kissed her.

THE END

(Continued from page 26)

"You're all wondering how the U. S. Marshal got into the valley and how I got out to begin with. But that's not important right now. Lem Perkins and I just turned into a couple of human flies and crawled up the Sierra Ladrone's.

"The important thing is that we *did* get through. Right now, Hobson's freighters are lowering five tons of food into the valley with ropes. It's consigned to Shelia Wilson's store."

A shout went up from the crowd, but Trent cut it short. "I want every man who has a team and wagon to head out there and help bring that stuff into town. Lem Perkins will load your wagons, and Miss Shelia will check the stuff in when you get back."

He paused, his face suddenly grave. "You men are on your honor in this thing. But because Tod Wilson was a friend to all of you, I know there will be no looting of Miss Shelia's supplies. As soon as she can check things in, you'll all have a chance to buy everything you want to buy at regular prices.

"And you needn't worry about things running short. Since Thomas Jeffries left no known heirs, Miss Shelia will take over his supplies. As soon as the marshal is able, she'll bid it in at public auction. And until spring, Hobson will lower extra supplies to the Valley once a month. Now—get going!"

With a hysterical roar, the crowd scattered for horses, wagons—anything that could be used to carry food back. For the first time in months the leaden fear of starvation was lifted from their hearts.

Winter Valley was free again, and it would be free forever.

With a smile Doctor Jim Trent wiped the blood from his face and stumbled inside the Emporium. He knew that back at the Wilson cottage Shelia was waiting for him to ask her a certain question. And that her answer this time would be permanent. But right now, there were two men here who needed his attention.

He thought, *Always on the go. No rest, not too much money, and not always even gratitude.* But then that was life of a frontier doctor—and he loved it.

THE END

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AUTO-CRAFTS DIVISION

(Continued from page 68)

lin's gun roared. Race felt a giant hammer hit his shoulder, and slam him backwards. He rolled over, shaking off the red haze in front of his eyes, and brought his gun muzzle up.

Macklin was firing again when Race pulled the trigger. The big rancher bent in the middle. But Macklin died hard. He stumbled back a step, his gun coming up again. Race knew a moment of despair. It would take another bullet to kill Macklin, and by that time, Sheriff Andrews and the others—

A gun opened up from the walls of the Pass as Judge Breeden bought back into the play. Race fired at Macklin again, then swung his muzzle toward the others.

But there was no need. One of the Rocking M punchers was down in the dust. The other puncher and Sheriff Andrews had their hands in the air.

They loaded the five bodies on the buckboard. Then Judge Breeden broke the silence as they jogged slowly along the trail home.

"Now tell me what this was all about, dang it!"

"The first thing I noticed when I hit town was that both Thad Malone and John Macklin carried knives. Macklin even had his in jail, cutting himself a chunk of beef with it. Men that carry knives, can usually throw 'em."

"And Joe Stanley and Pete Lasser were knifed to death right in town, is that it?"

Race nodded. "Probably Macklin threw one knife, Malone the other. Anyhow, it was a quiet killing. Then somebody ripped a gash in Sheriff Andrews' head—enough to cause a lot of blood, but not serious at all.

"Meanwhile, Macklin and one of his men took the bodies of Stanley and Lasser out to a pre-arranged place. The other man left and Macklin set the stage to make it look as is he was about to be hanged. Am I right, Sheriff Andrews?"

Andrews swore dejectedly. "Macklin said he didn't aim to kill those two boys."

"That's confession enough for me," Race grinned at Judge Breeden. "When I get back to town, I'm gonna do what I been wanting to ever since I left the capitol—burn that pardon for Macklin!"

THE END

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overseer's house threatened Hester with "conjur."

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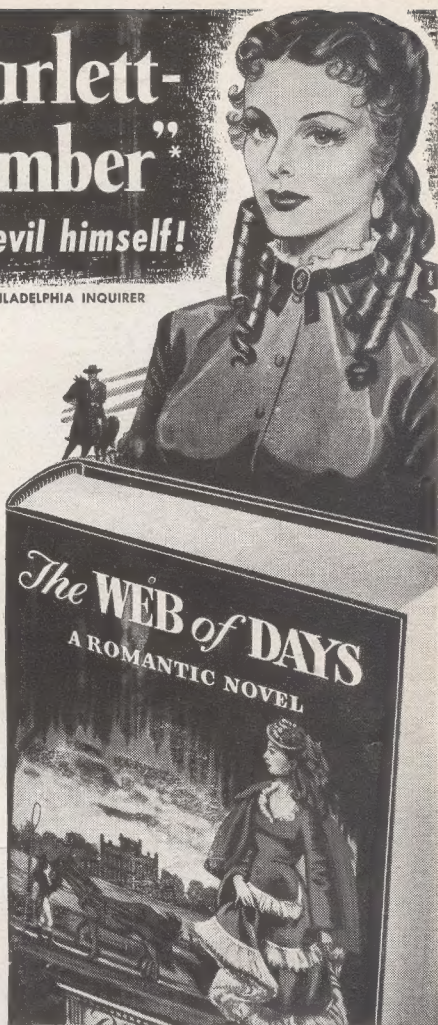
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